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Bardic Runes XI

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Gratias Agimus

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The Tree of All Seeds

by Sean Durward

Faridun hurriedly burst through the door and found his teacher, Daena, prostrate again, beads of sweat navigating the dense network of canals across her brow. He felt himself impaled by anxiety.

"You illumine my eyes, boy. Give me to drink of the haoma." His heart fell. His teacher's voice struck him as feeble than he had ever heard it, little more than a rasping whisper.

He passed a tankard to her, and she struggled to lift herself on one elbow as she sipped the warm, phantasmagoric green fluid, which sent vapor whips gyrating upward in the cool mountain air. He worried about her frailty. "You seem worse off today. I should have let someone else do the shepherding."

"How old are you, again?"

"Fifteen, almost sixteen."

"You are not ready. He is strong, so monstrously strong."

"What's the matter, kavi? Who do you mean?"

"The Azhi Dahaka, the three mawed, six-eyed scion of Ahriman, the lie-spawn who struck me down from afar the night we arrived here on this mountain."

"You're going to be all right, aren't you?" Faridun had known virtually no other mother and the thought that she might tread the chinvat paretu, the bridge to the next world, created a daunting void in his soul.

"The scaly ghoul thought I'd be dead by now, but I've outfoxed him thus far. Truth is stronger than he can ever surmise." The syllables became indistinct.

"Isn't there anything we could do? Surely there is a counterspell."

She hacked again, then lay back, fatigued, on her woolen bedding.

"How many healing herbs do you know?"

"You already know the answer. Nine hundred."

"A pitiful number. When I was your age, I knew three thousand. No, it's not your fault. It's the drought of falseness that's seized the world, withering stalk and flesh, lake and soil, god and human. The herb that would heal me no longer grows in Persia."

"What is it called? It may still exist in some other land."

"Will you roam the world for years, on the chance of healing an old woman that the vultures are already ogling? No, you will be needed soon in Persia, once you come of age. Still, it would help if I could complete you're training. He's so strong."

Faridun sighed. He knew Daena had summoned him for some other purpose than simply to discourage him, but he could not puzzle out what it was.

"Once the drought ends, kavi, will it be possible to repopulate the land with useful plants?"

She stared at the rough, uncovered poplar rafters. "The drought has lasted so long that in a short time its effects will be irreversible."

"How can we stop it?"

"In the midst of Lake Vourukasha stands the giant Tree of All Seeds, in which nests the mystic Saena bird, whose name is Simurgh. From that tree dangle myriad buds and kernels, for it is the mother of all plants.

"When the Saena bird flaps her colossal wings, she scatters the seeds abroad, to the ends of the earth. Those seeds would regenerate Persia, were the rains to come again."

Faridun perceived the way out, and seized upon it. "Then the herb that would mend you exists somewhere on the twigs of the Tree of All Seeds."

She fell silent.

"Describe to me what the seed we need looks like, and I will retrieve it."

"What you suggest is too dangerous. Few live to cross Lake Vourukasha, few avoid the teeth and claws of the Saena bird."

"I'm going, unless you forbid me."

She lay quietly for a long time. "If you go, go quickly. I do not think I have more than a month at most."

Faridun was surprised at receiving even grudging permission to set out, surprised to be allowed to go alone. Was this a test of some sort?

Since Shemran already nestled in the Elburz range, they were not all that far from Lake Vourukasha, which lay beyond the lush valleys and jungles of Mazandaran. During the first part of his journey he and the donkey had to ascend further into the mountains along jagged paths that jutted breathtakingly over dizzying vistas of airy depths. As they descended the baleful igneous stone gradually gave way to a light soil cover, hardy shrubs and thorn bushes, then to gnarled junipers, and finally they reached the low-lying chartreuse carpet of Mazandaran, with its almond, pistachio, willow and poplar forests.

Faridun knew it was only a matter of time before the dragon lord's withering droughtspell reached beyond Persia to these jungle climes as well. Zohak, a prince of the bedouin, was rumoured once to have been a normal man, who studied the dark arts with an outcast sorcerer of Babylon. He used the sorcerer to come to power, and then betrayed him. In revenge, the thaumaturge had ensorcelled his erstwhile student, causing two serpents to grow from his shoulders, each of which required for its daily sustenance the brain of a young man. Zohak had overthrown the great shah, Jamshid, and

had battered onto Persia like a baleful vampire. He retrained its priests as black wizards, conscripted its youths for snake-fodder and, offended by Persia's lavish gardens had cast a powerful hex upon the land, parching it and transforming it into barren desert. Daena, his teacher, was one of the few sorceresses able to withstand Zohak. But for how long?

Faridun came upon a village of thatched huts late in the day, and decided to risk staying there the night. The peasants wore a resentful mien and they had no guest house but they agreed to let him bed down his donkey and sleep inside their mud walls. Faridun knew that panthers and div demons infested these wooded lowlands, and wanted the safety that lay in numbers where he could get it.

He asked for someone who might be interested in selling a horse and was directed to a corpulent man who wore a sly look on his pockmarked face and had only four fingers on his right hand. The man showed him a four year old that while not ideal, was serviceable.

"You from Persia?"

"What makes you think that?"

"You just look like a Persian, that's all. Don't worry, we heard all about your Zohak, and we like him here in Mazandaran."

Faridun neglected to respond and pointedly led the fire-colored stallion away. The pimply-faced peasant, his left cheek flexed in a sour squint against the declining sun, watched him move off. Faridun shuddered, and wondered whether he should change his mind about staying the night in the hamlet. He decided that for him to depart suddenly would make them suspicious, and that he had best sleep with a dagger in his hand. The sun set and he lay down on his bedding in a patch of grass near his donkey.

A faint scream awoke him. It must have been past midnight. He sat up. He clasped the haft of his dagger. It sounded like a boy's voice. A chill tingled through Faridun's shoulders. He made sure his animals were hobbled, then snuck between the huts till he discovered one with a fire lit and a crowd gathered within. He found he could peer into the hovel through cracks in the reed walls. The peasant who had sold him the horse was cracking open the brain of a foreign boy, a Mannean from the looks of the mutilated cadaver. He extracted the grey jelly with his four fingered hand and fed it slowly to the hearth fire, which sizzled and emitted an unsavory odor. Then he passed about the half-raw, blood-filled brain to the other villagers, who took turns biting into it while the others chanted an incantation.

Faridun stealthily hurried back to his animals, hastily packed his donkey, and mounted his new horse, which he had named Melit. He headed for the village gates, and awoke the watchman.

"Getting an awful early start, I'd say."

"I've got a long way to go."

The old man pushed up the crossbar and creaked almost as much as the gates in opening them.

An uproar broke out behind Faridun, who wheeled to see a mob of villagers, led by the four fingered one.

"Stop him. He's our's for the morrow." They were drunk on beer or haoma, and seemed to be acting without any forethought.

Faridun urged the skittish Melit on, and pulled on the reins of his donkey. The donkey balked, spooked by the peasants' torches and shouts. Faridun railed in his mind against the stupid beast, and looked nervously behind him. The throng was nearing. He reluctantly let go of the reins and sent Melit into a gallop. Arrows whizzed by them. He had to get out of range, or his skull would be split next. A shaft grazed his left shoulder, and he braced for another between the shoulder blades. Abruptly, he outpaced the archers, and gloried as the warm night air fled past his ears. He was free and alive, but without provisions. Even his archery tackle had been in his saddle pack.

Thereafter Faridun skirted villages, having formed a poor opinion of Mazandaranis. At last, one day around Rapithwina, when the sun had swept to the top of the sky's lapis dome, Faridun sighted the lapping waters of Lake Vourukasha. He urged Melit to a gallop, whooping, and soon the roan stallion was caracoling along the sandy shore of the cosmic sea. In the distance, on an island, Faridun could make out the stick-like form of the Tree of All Seeds. It suddenly struck him that the span between him and it was much too far to swim, and that he had no nautical experience whatsoever. He had seen no villagers for days and the beach was deserted as far as he could see in both directions. He did not have any tools with which to construct a raft, and anyway spotted no trees near the beach that were suited to this purpose. The edges of his mouth drooped. When the sun began to slip behind Mount Hara, he reluctantly made camp in the gloaming, kicking angrily at the sand. He worried about Daena. Was she still alive? Would he be able to retrieve the healing herb in time to save her?

Faridun passed the night restlessly in this eerie, bleak grey cove, disturbed by the thunder of the sea, the uncanny calls of gulls, the irritating salt in his nostrils. When he awoke she was bending over him, her long blond hair tickling his face. He stared at the feral features, the sky blue eyes, the white, even teeth, then rolled over and sat up.

"Are you from a nearby village? I need to hire a boatman."

"You're out of luck, stranger. No villages for a full horse day. After all, what peasant wants to live in the path of the seed cloud?"

"Seed cloud?"

"You are an outlander, aren't you?" She pointed toward the sea. "When the Saena bird agitates its wings, the seeds fly off the Tree of Healing so densely that they darken the sun. What is your business here?"

He hesitated. "Let me ask you something. In your village, is Zohak admired or despised?"

Horror swept across the fair, sharp features, the silvery eyebrows flaring. "We abhor that weresnake." She stepped back. "You're not one of his minions? I warn you, my brother is not far off, and he would track you to the ends of the earth if you harmed me."

"No, no, it is all right. He has killed friends of mine among the kavis. I hate him as well. I have found, though, that not all the people of Mazandaran share your views."

"You did not answer my question."

"I am here on a quest for an herbal remedy that would cure an old seeress, a woman of great power who may be our last hope of vanquishing Zohak."

She appeared mollified. "In that case I wish you luck."

"What about you? If no one lives in the area, what are you doing here?"

She giggled winningly and pointed to a small rowboat beached to their left in the dawn-pink sand. "I was fishing. It is a good area because so few risk coming near the well-watered Tree, and I noticed you sleeping at the head of the cove."

Faridun's heart vaulted through his chest when he saw her humble but yare rowboat. "Will you take me out to that island? I will pay you well."

Her large eyes widened further. "Are you mad? No one goes there. The Saena bird would have us for breakfast."

"Listen, it is only a matter of time till Zohak extends his conquests to Mazandaran. You want to stop that from happening, do you not?"

Abruptly, she wore a strange expression. "Of course."

"Then take me out to the island. If we can save Kavi Daena, we have a chance of overthrowing old Six Eyes. I'll pay you a silver ingot."

"Five."

"Two."

"Oh, all right."

Faridun hobbled Melit, who watched with apparent apprehension as the two of them rowed out to sea, leaving him alone on the misty cove. Ziyanak taught him how to row, and they took turns for a double hour. Then finally they splashed ashore on the island and laboriously tugged the rowboat high up on the beach. She dexterously secured it to a jutting stone with a fisherman's knot in the hemp rope.

They plunged into the lush undergrowth that led to a jungle of proliferous plant life, herbs with glaucous leaves, flowers with purple stamens, vermillion bushes, Venus fly-traps, spider plants, wild vineyards, in infinite variety and variation, crowding in and encroaching upon one another in spirited competition for the sun. It was well after noon by the

time they stood awe struck beneath the city sized bole of the Tree of all Seeds.

"I will climb up and try to find the seed I am looking for. Kavi Daena described it to me in detail." "I will keep watch and try to warn of any danger. The Saena bird is gone for the moment, but she could return any time. She does not take kindly to intruders."

"Why is she so inhospitable, by the way?"

"Many wicked persons would like to chop the Tree of Healing down and use it to build a great caravel or a magnificent palace. The Saena bird protects it."

Faridun nodded, and accepted a leg-up from Ziyanak so as to catch hold of a lower branch. He scrambled up the trunk, ascending from one bough to the next, examining the variegated buds on each. He was looking for a round, scarlet nut, hard but with a smooth texture. Along the way, he plucked and stuck into the bag that hung from his belt all the seeds whose form he did not recognize. By the time the sun hung low against the horizon, Faridun's muscles ached intensely, but he had caught no glimpse of anything resembling the red stone he sought. He worried about night falling, about the possible arrival of an enraged Saena bird, and about Ziyanak below. He had known her less than a day, but already found himself impressed by her courage and resourcefulness. Then, too, the symmetry of her features and the precocious shapeliness of her lithe body excited feelings in him that he had never experienced before.

He swung up on a large gnarled branch, and then he saw it, the crimson kernel that hung from a twig at the end of the branch and fit Daena's description precisely, and Faridun felt an inner certainty that he had located his quarry. He began to crawl out to it, arm over arm, knee beside knee. The flimsy bough drooped ominously. The nut was almost in his grasp. He leaned forward, desperate, and snatched it up, jerking it off the stem.

Without warning, a tumultuous wind struck up, snapping the branch so that it hung only from a twist of bark, and pushing him to swing like a pendulum. The gale then blew more fiercely, and pinpricks tortured his body as seeds flew into the air thick as locusts. He had to close his eyes, buffeted and suffering. A sound like a hundred seas roaring assaulted his ears, and he felt a hoary presence. He knew then that the Saena bird had returned to her aerie. He waited fatalistically for the turbulent wind to break off his branch altogether, and wondered if the boughs below would break his fall, or just his body. Suddenly the air exploded from his lungs when a pair of forelegs seized him and squeezed, and he felt himself lifted, torn away from his lifeline, and carried like a mouse in a falcon's grasp. After a short flight, the agitated fowl reached her nest and unceremoniously released Faridun into it, letting him plummet into the hard scratchy woven twigs. She perched on a supporting bough and peered down at him. The

quick movements of her head and the darting gaze of her eyes suggested she was in a furor. Awe overwhelmed him. She had the face of a dog, along with a dog's paws for forelimbs. The rest of her body, however, was that of a bird. The rippling lips pulled back as she growled. Would she kill him as an interloper? Faridun debated with himself whether to lie still or to attempt an escape. In the end he could not choose inaction. It was not in his nature. He rolled over and tried to pull himself over the edge of the nest, but the Saena bird's watchful muzzle nudged him back. He skidded to the bottom of the aerie, his skin lacerated by the sharp twigs and brush. He got to his feet. The great dog-bird, its pistachio green plumage brilliant in the slanting rays of the late afternoon sun, eyed him carefully, as though he were a struggling worm.

He found himself standing in the midst of accumulated trinkets, baubles and white bleached bones that, he surmised, had belonged to previous visitors. Among all the rings, brooches, necklaces, torques, anklets, nose-rings and even bejewelled daggers, one item beckoned to Faridun with an eldritch glow. It was a jade feather of the Simurgh, zebra-striped by the rays of sunlight that wove through the leaves and branches to strike it. The lustrous, soft plumage possessed an indefinable sheen that distinguished it even from the diamonds around it. He shrugged and picked it up, keeping one eye on his captor. The great winged creature appeared torn by a contest between its curiosity, which wanted to know what sort of being he was, and its anger and hunger, which urged it to pick the flesh off his bones.

The Saena bird abruptly cocked its enormous canine head, peering at him with intense inquisitiveness, then with a quick motion inclined to the other side. He began to guess the cause for this puzzlement in his hostess. When he grasped the green quill, he had felt a surge of invincible potency, and now as he gazed at his scraped and bleeding forearms he noticed a glow playing over them. Somehow the talismanic feather bore within itself immense power. He felt the giant fowl's mind touch his, gently and with solicitude, and he responded, trying to tell her of the bewitchment Zohak had cast on Kavi Daena, and how the kernel still embedded in his right hand held out the only hope of saving her life. The creature ruffled its pinions slightly, in dismay and commiseration. At that moment Faridun felt at one with the Saena bird, and with the cosmos, as though the earth had become his body, the sea his eyes, the plants his limbs, the sky his cranium and the bird his soul, all communing in irenic harmony. For the first time he saw himself clearly, and in his new serenity and union with all things he began to see a way to roll back the parched Lie that Zohak had cast upon the world.

Simurgh spread her emerald wings and began gently beating them against the air, as though only for balance at first, then he found himself in her grasp again, whirling through a tempest of pelting seeds and violent gales. He felt her swoop precipitously, nearly to the ground, and then take

flight again as silvery, distant screams assaulted his ears. As soon as the hail of kernels died down a bit, he opened his eyes and saw Ziyanak in the other claw, struggling hysterically. Had he been wrong about the kindly emanations of the creature's mind? In what seemed like a few strokes of those sky spanning wings, they approached the mainland shore, and Faridun made out the miniature form of Melit reclining near the beach. The stallion stirred himself at the approach of the cosmic bird, rearing frantically. Abruptly, Simurgh swooped and relinquished them just above the beach. Both went tumbling over the sand, landing in the foam of the gently lapping waves. They instinctively found each other and embraced.

She recoiled. "You are glowing."

"I am?"

"It is the farr, the victory halo. I could not see it about you before."

He looked towards the heavens, finding the Saena bird a mere pinprick, making her swift way back to her perch. He held the brilliant feather to the sky, and a soft drizzle began. He gripped the healing seed in his left hand, thinking of Daena, of the urgent need to revive her and to finish his training. He yearned to wield his bull-headed mace against the dragon lord. Ziyanak giggled, her face radiant through the sheen of sea-foam and gentle rain.

SD

Queen of the Sea

Jennifer Taylor

"Quickly! The King's men are coming to search. You know what must be done." The messenger disappeared from the doorway in a swish of blue robes.

Larisa threw down her paint brush, leaving an ugly black stain on her manuscript page, and stood. In a state of shock, she moved to the back of her tiny room and drew aside the light gauze curtain. She gazed down on the sleeping child.

Four years had passed so swiftly, Larisa had almost forgotten the danger since she had taken the child, newborn from the mother's deathbed.

She had hoped to raise a daughter for the Temple, but now four years were wasted and so much at risk.

She brushed the thick red hair away from the little girl's face.

"Cora, sweetling, wake up." Pulling back the covers, Larisa gathered the child into her arms.

"Risa, what's wrong?" Cora asked sleepily.

"Nothing, sweetling. We are going to see The Lady."

Wrapping the child in a blanket, Larisa guided her toward the door. She knew everything would be ready. Anticipation of this moment had caused them to plan carefully. Taking the little girl's hand, Larisa and Cora hurried to the caverns below.

The Honoured Mother waited in silence for them to reach her. She held out her hand. Larisa took the gilded leather box and slipped it into her pocket. With her other hand she accepted a clay goblet.

"You know this must be done. Have her drink."

Larisa nodded and gave Cora the drugged wine to sip.

"Enough. Be gone and be quick about it." The Honoured Mother stepped back into the shadows to watch as Larisa eased a small boat into the water and left the cavern.

The tide helped carry them out as Larisa began to row. She gazed at the sleeping child and knew the discovery of her existence would mean the destruction of the Temple. Still, Larisa believed the power, if they had succeeded, had been worth the risk.

She was far enough now. The small boat rose with each cresting wave. Larisa glanced up to the moon and prayed the Goddess would turn her face and not watch the shameful deed.

Hardening her heart, Larisa picked up the net coiled at her feet. Struggling with the weights, she rolled Cora and the net into one and slid the sleeping child into the icy sea.

Larisa watched as the net sank slowly, bubbles of trapped air rising to the surface to escape. She watched till there was nothing left to see or hear but the soft sounds of the waves lapping at the wooden gunwales. Grasping both sides of the boat, she willed the pain to go away. Only the thought that she had secured the Temple's future allowed Larisa to pick up the oars and begin to row.

Remembering the leather box, Larisa retrieved it from her robe and lifted up the lid. She had not seen the necklace since the night she had stolen it from the dying queen. It was to have been their proof and Cora's birthright. Now it was nothing.

Holding the necklace up in the moonlight made the jewels glow. Larisa was tempted to simply tuck it back into the folds of her robe. Perhaps something could be salvaged from the last four years.

She shifted the glittering necklace in her hand and sighed. The threat from Cora's uncle, the king, was too great. All traces of the stolen princess had to be obliterated if the Temple was to survive the king's scrutiny. Larisa raised her hand and tossed the necklace into the sea. With a lighter heart, she began to row back to the Temple, unaware she was being watched.

Dark silent eyes followed her movements. A sleek head slid back beneath the water and dove to investigate. The seal surfaced with the discarded necklace draped rakishly around his throat. Eagerly, he raced for

a nearby island of rock. He barked once in excitement as he reached the shore and heaved himself out of the water.

"Hush now!" The voice was gentle. In the shimmering moonlight a tall woman stepped forward. "What have you found?" She reached out her hand and lifted the necklace from the seal. He lowered his head as she caressed his sleek fur.

"Off with it; we have company."

The seal was so curious he shook himself dry and wriggled out of his skin. A small boy ran over to the woman and took her hand.

"Who is it, Mama?" His words were still childish but a hint of the harsh bark remained.

"Bring your skin, love. We need them all right now."

The boy ran sure footed over the rocks to fetch his fur. He rushed back to his mother and was astonished to see a young girl sitting shivering in the middle of a pile of sealskins. A rope net lay spread out nearby.

"Is that her skin?" He asked pointing at the net.

"No, love. She has no skin, so you must lend her yours until she is dry."

"Where did she come from, Mama?"

"From the sea, love." The woman held up the necklace and smiled. She is going to be a queen when she grows older."

"But you are Queen of the Sea."

The woman laughed and held her son close. "Only to the Selkies, my love. There are many other queens. We will keep her safe until she has grown. Then she can rule her land and I will still rule the sea."

The little selkie ran forward and draped his furskin around the girl's shoulders. He sat down beside her and touched her long red hair.

Cora smiled drowsily and settled back down to sleep.

JT

The Gate of Tannerbagesh

James R. Field

(Byzantine Empire, early 7th Century)

I came across the cult of the gate on my last trip beyond the far reaches of the Empire, a trip the Emperor's Syrian physician had warned me not to undertake. He reminded me that if it hadn't been for him I would have died from the fever I picked up from my last trip to Africa. My health was not fully restored. He suggested a regimen of bleeding.

"In the meantime, why don't you let me put in a good word for you with the Emperor? Get you a desk job. Or a pension."

I shook my head. I hated the court, hated the time I was forced to spend between missions, bowing and scraping to courtiers, trying to play the game while in my heart aching to kick the dust of the court off my feet and travel.

Besides, the Emperor was displeased with me. I had failed to give him good intelligence of the recent Barbarian incursions in the North. Never mind I was in Africa at the time. The court didn't work that way and a few good words from the Emperor's physician would not change that. I needed one last successful mission to redeem myself.

I had come quite a ways off the beaten track into a bit of a backwater rarely visited by the Emperor's agents but where substantial movements of Persian troops had been reported. My mission was to assess whether they posed a threat to the Empire. I had made arrangements to meet a contact, Gregor, at a prearranged place, a slightly disreputable tavern frequented equally by thieves, vagabonds and merchants. I knew Gregor from way back. I'd trained him as a young recruit and taught him everything he knew about the business of spying.

The air in the tavern was thick with the pungent smells of spilt wine and smoke from the badly vented fireplace. A group of musicians was playing something primitive and wild and there was a thin, wiry man whirling around like a top, dancing to the music. The smoke and the noise provided a blanket of anonymity. I quickly dropped my pretense of being a merchant meeting a caravan.

"Well, what have you got?" I asked Gregor.

Gregor made his report. The "troop movements" were in fact nothing more than a change of garisons and retirement of old troops. "Routine housecleaning" and nothing to worry the Emperor about.

Having made his report, Gregor, who knew my predilection for religious cults added, "While you're here, you must see the gate of Tannerbagesh."

"The gate of what?"

"Not what. Who. The gate of Tannerbagesh. I'll take you there tomorrow. But whatever you do, don't pass through the gate.

"Why not?"

"Whoever passes through the gate is a marked man. He will almost certainly die within a year."

"A local superstition, surely. Do you believe it?"

"Of course I do. It's only good manners. In this business..." He gave a shrug. I knew what he meant. Probably the most important thing I'd taught Gregor as a young recruit was the importance of keeping a low profile and mingling with the natives. That meant heeding local customs and religious anomalies.

"Legend has it," Gregor continued, "one of Alexander the Great's cavalry commanders led an entire troop through the gate and they simply vanished. You won't find that story in any history book, but the natives here all believe it."

"Alexander the Great? This must be a pretty old gate."

"Old? It's been here since the beginning of time. According to the legend there was an evil god who made all mankind his prisoners. He created the world as a jail. Before that mankind had lived in another world. Like paradise or the garden of Eden."

I brought my memory into play. I never write things down. It would make people suspicious, and would leave a trail that could fall into the wrong hands. After I returned to court, I would have to write something, but only to satisfy the imperial scribblers.

"Anyway, to keep men prisoners the evil god built a great wall. In that wall there was a gate which in long ago times led into another world. And the gate was guarded by a huge and fierce giant."

"An Archon," I murmured. I recognized the main ingredients right away.

According to a Gnostic heresy, the world is nothing more than one vast prison, and we its prisoners. We are aliens in a foreign land, exiles eking out a miserable existence on strange foods, living among strange people.

I have felt this all my life. Not just because I am not myself Greek. The Emperor's court is full of non-Greeks. If anything it must be the Greeks who don't feel at home. No, it goes deeper than that. I guess that's why, although I am an agent of the Emperor, and the Gnostic heretics are the enemies of the Empire, I always felt myself closer to them than to the priests of orthodoxy at court. Perhaps that, too, is why I enjoyed the fact that my work involved travel. Whenever I was dissatisfied with my lot, with the terrible monotony of day to day life at court, there was usually some mission waiting for me. I'd pack a bag and set off, usually for the fringes of the Empire, far from the hypocrisy and the manipulations of the court. I could be gone for years at a time, travelling incognito, putting on disguises, losing my very sense of self in a game of deceit.

Somehow I felt more comfortable like this, disguised in exotic lands. Yet no matter how far I travelled, or how exotic the foreign lands I visited, I still felt the same emptiness within. I realized that all the time I was travelling in foreign lands I was really searching for another world. Perhaps this explained why I was so curious about the religious customs and doctrines of the lands I visited, and why I have always had a particular fondness for the esoterica of obscure Gnostic sects, whose legends, tales and doctrines I have collected wherever I have encountered them.

As an agent of the Emperor, of course, I was sworn to treat them as the enemy, and report back to the Emperor all their activities. Sometimes this resulted in a new wave of suppression and persecution. It wasn't me. It

was my job. Deep within, though, I felt they were brothers and kindred spirits. It bothered me that they might be persecuted because of me, but what could I do?

So far Gregor's tale was the traditional Gnostic metaphor. Of course, Gnostic doctrine usually put the Archons and the "gate" in heaven. The idea of a real and actual gate here on earth was one I'd never heard before and the concept intrigued me. Why, indeed, shouldn't such a portal be here on earth just as well as in the heavens?

"Most men soon forgot that they were prisoners. The world was a big place, leastwise big enough for small people, and the demands of day to day living kept most people pretty well occupied. Some men, however, did remember or thought they did. Maybe they dreamed it. Maybe it came to them in a sort of a flash, or the way a person suffering from amnesia remembers things, in bits and pieces. Whatever the case, they weren't content to sit and rot in prison. They wanted to get out. So they started travelling. Maybe they didn't have the slightest clue where they were travelling to. Maybe they just had itchy feet. But sooner or later they all found themselves in front of the gate. And as soon as they did, and they saw the beautiful, lush green land on the other side, they knew that's where they wanted to go. That was the place they had been looking for all along.

"First, though, they had to get by the giant, and he wouldn't let them by. It didn't make any difference how much they begged, he remained immovable and pitiless. Some tried to bribe him. They offered him food, which he devoured greedily, and gold, which he pocketed in a big purse. Some offered him all their worldly possessions, even the shirts off their backs, and he took it all. But still he was immovable and pitiless.

" 'You are fools,' he said scornfully. 'None of the things you have given me really belonged to you. The only thing that belongs to you is your life. Give me that.'

"And then he laughed a horrible laugh. 'Another life, another brick. Only lives are truly useful to me. Look before you, if you have eyes. Every brick in this wall before you is a life. There is a spot reserved for each of you. The lives of all men end here and year by year the wall becomes higher and higher. You may give them to me now, if you wish, or you may wait. It doesn't matter. I will get them sooner or later.'

"Then the travellers stood back in horror, gazing in awe at the wall before them. Never before had it seemed so immense and so forbidding and they all turned back, miserable and dejected, to live out the rest of their lives in bitterness and despair, knowing that it was their fate to become another brick in the wall that kept all men prisoners.

"That's where Tannerbagesh came in. Tannerbagesh was a great man. He'd killed dragons and he was the son of a great king, and he decided he wasn't going to take any guff from any old giant, so he went up and killed him. You can imagine the fight. I hear the minstrels can sing all

evening about it. I've never been one for epic poetry, though, so if you want the details you'll have to ask the locals. I'll just say that Tannerbagesh killed the giant and leave it at that. And having done so he walked through the gate.

"To his surprise, however, he found that when he passed through the gate there was no longer a beautiful, lush, green land on the other side. There was just dirt and stones like there is here. He realized that though he had killed the giant he still could not pass to the land beyond unless he did as the giant told him. He had to give up his life. And so he did, right then and there. He took the same sword with which he had just killed the giant and he plunged it into his own breast.

"Ever since then the gate has been the object of pilgrimage. It was believed that if you wanted to pass over to the other world when you died you had to come to the gate first. Somehow from that there grew the belief that once you'd passed through the gate you would die. We all die sooner or later, but those who pass through the gate die sooner. So naturally most people put it off, the longer the better."

Gregor, his voice hoarse now from telling the story, took a long draught of wine, as if to emphasize where he himself stood on the issue of men's mortality: Drink now for tomorrow you die.

"I'll take you there tomorrow and you can see for yourself. The dying, the ill, the aged. Those are the ones you'll see, the pathetic creatures who know their time is up anyway."

We agreed to meet the next day in the market and set off bright and early the next day on foot. Gregor warned me not to be disappointed, saying that maybe he'd built it up the other night, and that really it was just a pile of bricks and nothing special. I told him it wasn't the pile of bricks I was interested in.

"I'm only interested in one brick. I want to know if one of them has my name on it."

Gregor looked at me sideways but didn't say anything. I hadn't told him my health problems; it wasn't the sort of thing you told a colleague in this business. However, I suspected he suspected, which was close enough to telling.

He led me through the narrow streets, past the tavern where we met the night before, and into the country. Gregor settled into a serious walking stride, long, confident steps with no nonsense about them and which I matched only with difficulty. Even so it was a good hour before we came to the gate.

Just as Gregor had warned, the gate was not a very impressive sight. It didn't seem to me the wall could have kept a herd of goats prisoners, and the gate itself was nothing more than a gap in the line of tumbled down bricks. I couldn't help reflecting bitterly that the dilapidation of this wall was a sign.

Sign of what, you ask? I'll tell you. A sign that our world had become a drab place without magic and that walls and gates and the giants and heroes of ancient times were no longer necessary because the other world, which men had once sought and strived for, no longer existed even in men's hearts. The Empire had squashed all that.

It seemed to me then that the heroics of Tannerbagesh had been in vain. The evil god had won after all.

Another disappointment was the lack of crowds. There didn't seem to be anybody about. I had imagined throngs of pilgrims.

The thought crossed my mind that Gregor had made the whole story up, but I quickly dismissed it. Gregor was capable of exaggeration, but not of spontaneous creative innovation. No, in this case the exaggeration had been all mine. The story had appealed to my imagination and my present disappointment was a result of my having been too subjective. Confounded by objective reality I was as shattered as the pilgrims of old must have been when confronted by the giant.

Trying hard to imagine once again a wall encircling the entire world, I walked down a ways. I hadn't come far when the pile of bricks petered out to a few scattered pieces half hidden in the grass. Had this once been the wall of an ancient city? I walked back the other way and found the same thing. Again the wall petered out and disappeared. If it had once been the wall of an ancient city there had to be other walls. But there was no sign of such a thing.

It was strange.

I returned to the gate. I looked at Gregor, remembering how he had told me whatever I did I must not pass through the gate. I recalled again the words of the Emperor's physician warning me not to undertake this journey. Then I shrugged my shoulders and took a step towards the gate.

"No, don't," Gregor said, placing his hand on my arm.

"You superstitious?"

"I just don't believe in tempting the gods."

"Gods?"

He shrugged.

It took me two, maybe three strides to pass through the gate.

What did I feel? I didn't vanish the way Alexander's cavalry commander had. There was no tingling in my bones. But, if you can imagine my mind as being a jumble of bricks like this old wall, and if you can imagine all the bricks suddenly falling into place, that's how I felt. I had an incredible feeling of well-being and certainty. I can't say what I became suddenly so certain about. It was the feeling of certainty without the specifics of certainty. It felt good.

I turned and looked at Gregor. Something passed between us, though we didn't speak. He must have seen in my eyes what I felt, and that made up his mind. He trembled, and something in him snapped and he gave

a shout and ran towards me. He threw himself through the gate the way a child, afraid of monsters under his bed, runs for the chamber pot at night. Afterwards, he stood beside me and laughed, puffing for breath. You'd have thought that he'd just killed the giant of the gate himself.

I returned to the court and made my report, applying for a pension at the same time. Unfortunately, Gregor's assessment of the enemy troop movements was a bit off the mark. The Persians have overrun Syria and Palestine, wreaking havoc with the Emperor's poorly prepared forces. Not surprisingly, the Emperor has not been forthcoming with a pension. It had been my job not just to collect Gregor's report but to verify it. Instead I'd spent my time on religious heresies, distracted by local folklore. Quite unprofessional of me, really.

So here I am, stuck at the court, bowing and scraping again, looking for a way to redeem myself. But my health is worse than ever, and I may never get the chance. The Emperor's physician only shakes his head, prescribing another regimen of bleeding, but adding as well that it "may be a good time to give some thought to the hereafter."

I tell him that I don't have to; I've already been there.

As for Gregor, I heard from him just a while ago. He'd made a rather good marriage with a local girl and decided to retire from the Emperor's service. It was time he settled down, he said, and cited the gate as being in part responsible for his decision.

"I realized then," he wrote, "I'd been to the ends of the earth and back and there really was no point in going further."

I shook my head reading this. I felt as if Gregor was selling out somehow. To pass through the gate of Tannerbagesh and then go home and settle for the mundane, drab, domestic life wasn't the sort of thing I'd have expected from him. But then maybe I had taken it all too seriously. Perhaps, after all, these local cults and superstitions are the stuff of folklore and the gossip of taverns, nothing more.

JRF

The Test of the Pearl

D.K. Latta

Fingers dug into packed soil. Then, the toes of her naked feet gripping the course rock, Neekin dragged herself onto the ledge. Rolling

over on her back, she heaved a shankful sigh. She was dressed in a leather vest and G-string, a hunting knife at her right thigh.

Exhaustion was knitted into her every fibre.

She had begun climbing hours before. Hours of inching up the sheer mountain face, dogmatically muttering praise to the spirit of the mountain, blessing its wisdom and, above all, its mercy, as she sought cracks for her fingers and toes; hours of muscles straining under the burning gaze of the sun; hours of leaving blood stains where knees and elbows grazed the unforgiving stone. It was a climb which, once begun, could only be completed. If hand and toe holds were difficult to discern going up, they were impossible to make out going down, so close was her body pressed to the mountain's skin.

Which left only the drop.

Far below was the river Xlt'tip, which even in the rainy season was scarcely worth wading in. And jagged obsidian stones stabbed viciously from the water's foaming breast.

So the climb had to be fulfilled.

Past vines hugging the mountain's lower face, thorns graced with such violent poison as to be too dangerous even to collect for war arrows.

Past hungry mountain rats living in burrows that made deceptively enticing hand holds.

And on she went.

Slipping between the sticky tendrils of the Colchri's web, knowing that jostling one would bring the giant arachnid down upon her. Against the Colchri, who feasted mainly upon flying giant Latchas, a human being would stand no chance at all.

At last, though, she had achieved the ledge.

Neekin propped up on her elbows. Across the chasm was the mountain's sister, even more treacherous and impassable. To her right was the wood-arched mouth to the Namilo's cave, which she had expected. Before it was a tall figure in a ratty green robe, features concealed behind a ram-horned mask, which she had not. Not so soon at any rate.

"Most do not even make it half way," he growled, his voice lent a cavernous echo by his mask, "before slipping and being dashed upon Xlt'tip's teeth. Congratulations." He leaped forward.

Neekin started to move. Too slow.

A sandaled foot hit her hard, shoving, and she plunged into the abyss.

"You are discontented?" asked Yisherud, her features gaunt, her long hair greying. She was dressed in ornamental mail, a powder blue cloak about her shoulders, her ceremonial sword, Tisha, sheathed at her side. "You have been with us twenty-three months and you are discontented," she repeated, no longer as a question, her tone ironic, mocking. Dangerous.



Neekin looked up from where she knelt before the high priestess. She would not be dissuaded, nor intimidated. "My brothers were already first level priests by this time in their training in the temple of Ghun."

A look shifting between amusement and boredom played with Yisherud's steel-grey eyes. "They are men. The priests of Ghun are as lambs before the slaughtering blades of my priestesses." She spoke purely theoretically, of course, since the warrior-priests and the warrior-priestesses were sworn allies, going on two thousand years. "You would emulate them?"

Neekin glanced at the flame burning in the centre of the chamber as she considered her next words. "I feel...restricted. I am capable of more than I am being given, of learning more."

"You wish to advance to the next level?"

Neekin met the high priestess' gaze. "Yes."

"Impudent child. You will not be ready for half a score of years, if then."

"I am ready now." Neekin insisted quietly.

"Indeed?" Yisherud's hand fell casually into the folds of her cloak. Neekin caught the movement with her eye, tensed, and was ready when, with a flick of her wrist, the high priestess sent the bristling point of a knife whistling toward her.

Neekin neither ducked, nor turned. Instead with practised ease, she snatched the blade from the air itself and let it clatter harmlessly upon the marble steps.

Something flashed in Yisherud's eyes; she narrowed her lids.

"Perhaps..." she whispered. Then she drew her cloak about her. "But if I am to advance you, and risk causing dissension among your fellow novices, you must be tested. And by more than that simple trick." She nodded at the discarded blade and smiled coldly. "Yes. More thoroughly indeed."

Neekin grunted as the air was slammed from her lungs. Plunging, she had expected the next sensation to be that of her skull being dashed upon the rocks below. This was a gentler force. What she had hit yielded, then bounced back, supporting her in the middle of the sky. It was as if the gods had interceded and bestowed upon her, a lowly novice, salvation.

Her eyes snapped open, breath freezing in her lungs. There was only one thing between the ledge and the river below. And it was not salvation.

The Colchri's web

She was spread-eagled upon the thick, gummy strands, suspended between the two mountains, the wind whipping about her legs and arms. A few paces away stood a grisly foretelling of her future: the husk of a Latcha. The black-blue shell of the cow sized insect was intact, as were its wings, but the flesh had long since been consumed.

Neekin, rocking back and forth, helplessly awaited her own contribution to the Colchri's repast.

Rocking?

She turned her head and her heart stilled. The great arachnid approached, its long, hairy legs picking its way across its massive net. Neekin writhed, attempting to dislodge herself, a death upon the rocks being infinitely preferable to what was approaching. To no avail. The clingy web was not irresistible. She could shift back and forth, even pry a limb loose, but to pull required pushing. For every limb she freed another was reaffixed.

Sweat that had nothing to do with exertion trickled into her eyes, blurring her vision. But she was not spared the sight of the beast coming closer, each step sending shockwaves through the

web. She could smell its awful stench and hear its jaws rubbing hungrily together.

However, there was something about her obscured vision that triggered a fleeting memory. Calling upon her training, her months at the temple, willing her terror to subside, Neekin concentrated.

Then she had it. The Colchri were almost blind and responded solely to the trembling of the web.

She glanced at the dead Latcha, then at the Colchri that was almost upon her. Was there time? What choice did she have? She jerked and rolled across the sticky threads, slamming her body against the husk of the insect just as the Colchri reared up. The web trembled, mirroring its master's anticipation. The arachnid threw itself upon the long-dead shell. She winced as mandibles crunched through the hollow exoskeleton, and tensed as the Colchri pulled back, recognizing the corpse for what it was. The beast attacked again, sinking mandibles once more into the Latcha's back, one furry leg brushing Neekin's hip.

After a moment the Colchri relented. Confused, but convinced there was no flesh to be found, the great predator lumbered around and scurried off for a preferred spot on the web's perimeter.

Neekin let out a gasp of relief, only then realizing she had been holding her breath. She was safe, for the moment, but what good was that? If she moved, the Colchri would return, hungrier than ever, and below her was still the impossible drop.

Yisherud held the diadem before her, one finger absently tracing the hollow of its centre. "For a thousand years this has been the symbol of the order of Hiotchri, the mantle by which the high priestess is known as she leads her priestesses into battle against the forces of darkness." She stood before the headband's podium. At her side were the ranking priestesses: Gira, Jocal, and the ancient Hin, called the silent one. "The centrepiece of the diadem was a pearl most rare, said to have been plucked from the belly of a giant Ziar by the supreme priestess, Maltaria...but that is another story."

Yisherud set the diadem back upon its cushion and turned to Neekin. "Thirty years ago the pearl was stolen by a man who had acquired the confidence of the Order as no man had before, and certainly not since." She bit the words off with such vehemence that Neekin found herself speculating as to how the thief had 'acquired' this confidence. Thirty years ago, Yisherud would have been a ranking priestess, and the Order did not insist on celibacy once one had been ordained...

"How is not important," snapped Yisherud.

Neekin's eyes flared. Then she realized Yisherud meant the method of the thieving.

"He fled with the pearl, retreating to the Namilo's cave in the face of Xly'Hogun, to lead a hermit's life meditating upon the pearl's spiritual properties. For thirty years attempts have been made to reclaim it. Novices like yourself, desiring greater wisdom, greater rank, have sought to prove themselves in this way. All have died in the attempt. For, though there is a tunnel that leads through the heart of the mountain, its opening is unknown, even to this day. Thus, the only route to the cave is to climb the face of the mountain itself." Yisherud inhaled and drew her cloak about her, eyes narrowing. "Do you still wish to be tested, my eager young pupil?"

And Neekin said: "Yes."

She could not remain under the dry shell of the Latcha forever, though at least the dead insect's wings, swaying in the wind, provided shelter from the blistering sun. She stared at those wings for a moment, transfixed, then shook her head. That was an insane notion.

She glanced across the web to where the Colchri crouched against the face of the cliff. Its coarse fur was the same brown-grey as the stone,

rendering it all the more terrifying since she could not be sure where it left off and the cliff began. Only its black eyes, unblinking like a dead man's gaze betrayed it.

She shuddered and glanced up at the wings.

No. That was stupid, impossible.

She shifted slightly and viewed the river below. Her only options were to drop, and gain a quick death, or to attempt crawling across the web, outracing a beast three times her size that traversed the web every day. Down or across.

What about up?

Again she stared at the fluttering wings.

The Latcha was at least the weight of a human and it flew. Why not a novice? Her body slick with sweat, she peeled free one arm. Steeling herself, she slipped fingers between the plates on the creature's side, and pulled. The gummy threads released her reluctantly. Easing herself to a crouch, she glanced at the Colchri. The smear of camouflage stirred restlessly, aware of the trembling her activities caused, but not yet fully curious.

Drawing her knife, she cut at the web, shaving off sticky strips from the thick threads. When she had what she hoped would be enough, she stood. The wind tumbled past her, threatening to dash her from her perch.

Instinctively she muttered a prayer, praising the Latcha's spirit and asking its permission. With an unsteady hand, she went to work.

She dropped her feet over the side of the cot and sat up. Aolian wrapped her arms about Neekin's waist and lightly kissed her spine.

"I have to go," Neekin whispered, gently disengaging from the other woman. "It'll be light soon."

"Don't go," said Aolian. "What's so evil about training with the rest of us, anyway?"

Neekin smiled. "Nothing. But I need more."

"Those who refuse to follow the river may become lost in the woods'."

"Quoting the scriptures?" She stroked the prone woman's cheek. "how dutiful of you."

Aolian frowned. "I'll never see you again."

She opened her mouth, then stopped. "You don't know that," she said lamely.

She knew Aolian did not expect her to return alive. No one did.

She stood precariously upon the Latcha, a wing strapped to each arm with web shavings, the wind barreling past. Neekin twisted this way and that, frantically maintaining her balance even as the wind attempted to gather her up in its embrace. She found, suddenly, that she had lost her nerve. Then a bare foot slipped and she landed with a 'sproing' on the web.

Dazed, she tried to get up but was thrown down again as the web spasmed. Twisting her head, she gasped. The Colchri was scurrying toward her. Struggling, she managed to stand, but the gummy threads clung to her soles.

Glancing over her shoulder, she let out an instinctive scream as the Colchri launched itself at her. It fell short by a mere half-metre. As its weight dipped the web down, Neekin was flung into the air.

The wind caught her outstretched wings and, suddenly, she was flying.

She was flung one way by a current, then snatched up and dragged in the opposite direction by a new gust. She pitched down, almost into the web again, then was sucked up with a heady speed that almost made her faint.

Obviously, she realized, this would not be easy.

She looked down from the middle of the sky. The Colchri resembled more a tarantula than its true gargantuan dimensions, and the river had become just a thread of blue and white. She saw the summits of Xlt'Hogun and Xlt'Garien, both lushly green. Like a goddess, she saw what no human before her had ever seen. She felt a shuddering thrill from groin to head as she rode, unsteadily, the wind.

The Namilo's cave was already far below her, with no sign of the ram-horned figure. She twisted her wings and straightened her legs and shot down toward it. Panicking at the last moment, she pulled up, arcing into the heavens. She dived again, each time becoming surer, more in control of her newfound abilities. On the fifth pass she made to land.

She hit the ledge and rolled end over end, one wing snapping in half. She ended sprawled awkwardly, dazed, patches on her legs and arms scraped raw. She shook her head and, grunting, pushed herself to her knees. She cut at the strands tying her to the wings, unencumbering herself. Then she rose unsteadily to face the dark cave.

A shadow moved beneath the arch, disengaging itself from the deeper darkness. Two horns emerged into the light of the sun.

"Persistent," a voice said simply.

"Yes."

He leaned lazily, almost wearily, against the wood frame which Neekin now realized to be rotted and old. "Yisherud sent you for the pearl?"

She nodded, bone-white knuckles about the handle of her knife.

"And how is she? Yisherud, I mean."

Neekin raised an eyebrow. After a moment of hearing the wind's song and feeling the sun's gaze, she said, "Well."

The masked head nodded to itself.

"I've come for the pearl."

From slits in the mask his eyes blazed briefly with defiance. Then his shoulders sagged. "I was young when I stole it, cunning, brave, much like you, I imagine. The pearl was said to contain great secrets, its value more spiritual than temporal. Would you like to know at what great insight I have arrived after years of meditation?" Without waiting for a response, he said, "That I have grown old staring at a marble."

He chuckled dryly. "And Yisherud, no doubt, has grown old trying to reclaim it." He stared out at the chasm for a moment, then looked back at her. "And what did you hope to gain from this feat?"

Neekin shrugged. "Advancement in the Order. Greater knowledge, greater insight into the universe."

"What we sacrifice in the name of a lust for wisdom, eh? Are you familiar, perhaps, with the parable of the wiseman who sold his eyes for an ancient scroll only to find that, without eyes, he could not decipher its meaning?"

"How do you know the scriptures?" she demanded.

"The priests of Ghun and the priestesses of Hiotchri study the same texts," he explained simply. In answer to her astonished gaze, he nodded. "I was a priest of Ghun. Long, long ago."

She held out a hand. "Give me the pearl."

He stared at her blankly.

"If it has brought you no happiness or wisdom..."

"But it's mine," he said quietly. "I refer you to the story of the share-cropper covered in boils. When asked by the medicine man why he would not allow them to be lanced, he replied: 'I own no land, nor roof, and even these clothes I wear are borrowed...'"

"...But the boils are mine'," she finished for him.

He gave a curt nod. Then, with a yell, he leapt, an arc of steel flashing as it emerged with him from the shadows. He slashed at her head, but she ducked and drew her hunting knife along his thigh as he passed. She started to turn but something hit her in the back of the head, a foot perhaps. She fell and was lifted up again by a vicious kick to her belly. Flowing with the blow, she allowed the momentum to put distance between them.

He was a priest of Ghun, no doubt about it.

Scrambling to all fours, she watched as he charged again. At the last moment, she shot between his legs, kicking up as she went through. She rolled to a crouch and turned.

He was limping, she realized, from where she had cut him. His left leg. His weak spot. She launched herself at his left side, too late seeing the blood on his right thigh. A trick. The arc of steel slashed the air, but she twisted at the last moment, flaying her back as she skidded along the ground.

Gasping now, bone-weary from her climb, she flung her knife in desperation.

He made to catch the knife in mid air...and screamed as a finger split from his hand.

A priest. But long ago.

She gained her feet as his eyes blazed from beneath the ram's horns. He flung back his arm and charged, a battle cry echoing from behind the mask.

Neekin gathered what little remained of her strength and jumped, kicking out with both feet. The impact made him spin, then crash into the earth as his legs became entangled. Landing, Neekin instantly adopted a ready stance.

The man in the green robe struggled to rise, faltered, then lay still. She watched dumbly as crimson pooled about his chest.

Approaching cautiously, she nudged him with a toe. He did not stir. She realized then that he had fallen on his own steel.

A hollow end, she thought grimly, for a hollow man.

Kneeling, she turned him on his back and pried the mask loose. His hair was thinning and grey, his face pale. Once he might have been handsome. He seemed somehow unimposing.

Quietly, Neekin rose and entered the cave. Finding a gold casket, she brought it out into the light. Too impatient to search for a key, she worried the lock loose with her knife, then lifted the lid.

The pearl sat contentedly among green silk. She lifted it gingerly between thumb and forefinger. It was not a pretty stone, neither smooth nor fine. As he had observed, of spiritual value only.

She rolled it in her palm and considered. If she returned to the temple, she would receive immediate promotion to one of the inner circles and instruction in the wisdom that was exclusive to the elders. She could learn much. Then she closed her hand about the pearl. She and not Yisherud or any other had scaled Xlt'Hogun, and outwitted the Colchri and flown like the birds. She, Neekin, now held the pearl.

Perhaps the dead man had been trying to tell her something. What is the pursuit of wisdom if you are blind to having it? With a shrug, she tossed the pearl over the edge and stood up. Inside the cave would be a path to the valley, but Neekin did not think she would be returning to the temple.

After all, she had passed her test.

DKL

Hero for Hire

Mark C. Alldis

A young man walked into the tavern. His armour shone in the dull torchlight.

"I'm looking for Hogel," he announced above the noise.

I tried to ignore the young pup. Being a hero is hard work. Rescue a fair maiden, snatch victory from the jaws of sure defeat and everybody loves me. Everybody that is but the local headman or lord whose rear end I saved. After the joyous victory celebration I'm given my reward, if I'm lucky, then shown the nearest gate. The powers that be don't like having heroes around, makes them nervous.

I'm only as good as my last daring deed. The young bulls are always trying to make a name for themselves in a hurry, without the effort that goes into becoming a true hero. Spill a hero's blood in a, more or less, fair fight and they think they can become the cock of the walk.

Doesn't matter that they didn't earn it the hard way. Rescuing god-ugly women and fighting the lesser demons for coppers, working your way up the ranks: apprentice, journeyman, champion and finally full hero status. No, they want it all today, without learning the craft or getting the scars that go with the job.

All I wanted to do was finish my bucket of ale and maybe a few more, then take the big breasted serving girl to my room. Women are one of the good things about being a hero. They all want to bed down with a hero. The last thing I wanted was to fight some young dandy out to make a name for himself.

I looked him over and knew the type: shiny armour, clean tunic, a fancy sword he thought he knew how to use and a face like a young god. Real heroes look as worn as their dented armour, scuffed leather and well used weapons. Their faces show every battle.

"I'm looking for Hogel, Hogel the Hero," he repeated. The tavern became quiet and heads turned in my direction.

With no way out I finished my ale and stood up.

"I'm Hogel," I said with my hand resting on the hilt of my sword. As he walked to my table I tensed. I haven't lasted this long letting someone take the first cut.

He stood eyeing me up and down. He must have liked what he saw because he smiled.

"I need you."

I relaxed a little, just a little. The sneaky ones were the worst. I motioned with my head to an empty stool, not taking my eyes off him. I

sat down only after he did. It's almost impossible to draw a sword sitting down. That's why my hand shifted to the throwing knife in my boot.

"You found me. What do you want?"

He must have known who he was dealing with, because he kept his hands in sight, ignoring my hand under the table.

"My name is Mordel. I have a job for you, rather, my father, Lord Burgan does." He was still smiling.

"What kind of a job?" I was suspicious by nature. Someone tells you they have a job where you'll be going one against three, when it's really five or ten to one. Or, they come to me when they really want an assassin. Nothing wrong about assassin work, but I don't piss in someone else's garden. I waited.

Golden boy finally got the message. "There's a dragon that's moved onto my father's land. I'd take it on myself, but I'm getting married in a fortnight."

Yeah, right, I thought. Pretty boys don't like to get their hands dirty and dragons can be the dirtiest kind of work.

"You want it dead or just made to move on?"

"What's the difference?"

I shook my head. "Dead costs more, a lot more."

Pretty boy seemed unsure of himself.

"Well, dead seems better. It could come back after you've left."

I nodded. The boy had some sense, at least. "Before I give you a price, I need to know more about this dragon. What colour is it?"

"Does that matter?" he asked, as if he had asked where the outhouse was.

"Galdar's balls, boy," I shouted. "Of course it matters. Green ones are cowards. They'll run rather than fight. Red ones blow fire when they're mad. Trying to kill one usually makes it mad. Black ones are the worst. They're bad tempered and smart. They eat fancy boys like you for breakfast."

Mordel didn't like the last bit. "This one's black," he said between gritted teeth.

"Now how did I know you were going to say that? Dead will cost you one hundred gold crowns. Half now. Half when I give you proof it's dead."

"That seems rather steep."

I shrugged. "Then do it yourself. But I hope you're not your father's only heir."

"All right. All right. One hundred gold crowns, but I'm getting married in a fortnight. It has to be done before my wedding. Having a dragon around will make the guests nervous."

I spit in my hand, then held it out. Mordel took it with obvious distaste. I gave him a good bone crushing grip. His eyes watered, but he didn't whimper.

"Meet me here tomorrow morning. We'll leave then."

He gave me a nod, then left rubbing his hand on his armour. I ordered another bucket of ale and started negotiating a night's pleasure with the serving girl.

As a matter of pride I was up the next morning with my gear packed when the lordling arrived. My head felt like a pack of gnomes were driving very pointy spears into my brain. I met his cheeriness with a grunt and we were off, me swaying a bit in the saddle.

It was a day's ride to the castle Mordel called home. Golden boy started talking when we left the tavern and never let up. With an almost insistent whine, he told me how rich his father was and how large his holding. How rich his father-in-law-to-be was. How beautiful his bride-to-be was. Even though he had not seen her, he had been assured she had a great personality. That meant, to me, that the lass probably had a habit of chasing cats. By noon, the sun was hot, I was thirsty and the gnomes in my head hadn't tired of their game. When the lordling started on about how he really wanted to be a hero, I had had enough.

"Look, boy, being a hero is not some great romantic adventure like the travelling harpers go on about. It's a hard life. For some, it's a short one. And people's praise is a passing thing."

Mordel seemed surprised at my outburst and a little confused. I pulled up and Mordel had to trot back to me.

"How many men have I killed?" I asked.

"I don't know," Mordel answered, confusion in his blue eyes and wrinkles across his brow.

"Neither do I. Most deserved it and others were following someone who decided another man's pastures were greener. But that's what being a hero is all about, killing. Kill a man and you're a murderer; kill a hundred and you're a hero."

"But surely there's more to it than that. The fame. The glory." The light of excitement was in Mordel's eyes.

"Glory," I said, then spat. "Glory means luck was with you. You're alive and the others are dead."

I saw Mordel was far from convinced. "If you are intent on being a hero you need three things." I counted them off, raising fingers for emphasis. "One, luck. Two, brains. Three, skill. In that order. If you don't have the first, you'll never get a chance to use the other two." I drew my sword, well used Dwarven steel. "Any fool can use this, but without luck the odds will get you every time." I sheathed the sword. "If you have brains, you can outthink your enemy. A smart man knows when and how to fight to his best advantage. Most just scream and leap

at you, sword flailing, and they're dead just as fast. With skill you can take advantage of what luck brings and your brains provide. When all three work together, a hero comes out on top."

"You lucky?" Mordel asked. Some of what I'd said had sunk in.

"I'm here, and that's a lot more than I can say for others. So before you go on talking about becoming a hero, you'd better know if luck is on your side." I took a coin from my purse and tossed it in the air, then caught it on my wrist. "Call it, crowns or spears."

"After a moment's hesitation, Mordel said, "Spears."

I peeked at the coin, then put it back into my purse. "Better stick to lording, boy." I heeled my horse into a trot and Mordel followed much subdued, which suited me fine, because I made that speech to shut him up. I wasn't about to tell him the coin was 'spears'.

We came up on the castle late in the afternoon. A great pile of dark stone with towers and a massive curtain wall surrounded it all. By the time we had trotted through the gates, past dull-eyed sentries, I had decided that I could have taken the place with a dozen good men.

I hate castles. They're huge, drafty things that tie a man to one place and beg someone to come to try to take it away from you.

We met Lord Burgan in his great hall. A fire roared in a huge stone hearth, heating some of the room and filling the rest with whisps of smoke. The place smelled of spoiled food and stale ale. Fat hounds, too lazy to find the scraps tossed in the corners, lolled by the fire.

"So you're Hogel the Hero," Lord Burgan said by way of greeting. "I've heard a lot about you." A wide grin added a few more chins to those already hanging from his face. He was as round as an ale barrel. Fortunately for Mordel, he must have taken after his mother. A great sword, rich with gold and jewels but totally useless as a weapon, hung from a wide belt that disappeared under his sagging gut.

Mordel went to him and whispered in his ear. The grin faded from his face.

"What!" he roared. "A hundred crowns!" His face darkened and his eyes became slits of fat. "There was a time when a hero worked for his glory."

"Welcome to the real world, my lord. Glory is difficult to eat. You have a dragon that needs killing?"

"Yes, but a hundred crowns," he said as if he was a pauper.

"Save the coin then and keep the dragon," I said shrugging and started to leave.

"Wait. My son says you want half now and half when you bring proof the beast is dead."

I nodded. Mordel and his father whispered. Mordel must have been pleading my case because his father kept shaking his head. In the

end though he nodded and signalled his head steward. "Bring me fifty crowns, in gold."

I watched the fire as we waited for the head steward's return. He came carrying a heavy leather sack. I took the sack and opened it, spilling gold coins into my hand.

"Where's the dragon?" I said as I poured the coins back into the sack.

"It's in a cave in the hills," said Mordel.

I groaned and shook my head. Why is the cave always in the hills. Just once I'd like the cave to be in a valley, so I wouldn't have to lug all my gear up some god blasted goat path.

"How many of my men do you need?" Lord Burgan asked, obviously hoping it wasn't many. Good men were expensive to replace.

"I work alone."

Lord Burgan looked relieved, but Mordel blurted, "One against a black dragon. But you said black dragons are the worst."

"They are, but that's what being a hero is all about," I jiggled the coin sack. "That's why the fee is so high."

Mordel stared in awe and Lord Burgan nodded his head knowingly.

"Give me directions to this cave."

"I can take you," Mordel said hopefully.

"No," I said quickly. "Just give me directions. I don't need anyone making my job any more difficult than it already is." I memorized the directions Mordel gave me, then turned on my heel. I could almost hear music swell as I marched out of the hall.

Mordel's directions were good, even in the dark, and for the last half hour I only had to follow my nose. The smell of carrion was heavy in the air. I dismounted at the bone littered mouth of a large cave and unlashed my dragon lance from the saddle. Twelve feet long, it had a three foot Dwarven steel blade honed to a razor's edge. I lit a torch, then with the torch in one hand and my lance in the other, I entered the dragon's lair.

Once well inside the cave and out of view, I put the lance down.

"Galdar's balls, it stinks in here. Kozen, you old snake. You here?"

A massive black head loomed out of the darkness. Green eyes glowed, foot long fangs filled its mouth and a red forked tongue flicked in the air.

"I'm here," it hissed. Its breath was bad enough to kill an ox. I breathed through my mouth.

"You got the place rigged?"

"You got the gold?" it countered. Dragons love gold. They add to their hoard at any opportunity.

"Fifty gold crowns in my saddle bags and another fifty when I prove you're dead, just like we planned."

"Then the place is rigged. One pull on this rope," it held a thick rope up in one claw, "and a rock slide will seal the cave forever. No evidence that the great hero didn't kill the bad old dragon."

I smiled. Being a hero was hard work, but a smart man and a greedy dragon could get very, very rich.

MCA

Crown of Leaves

Judy L. Tucker

Keera walked down the hallway of the Crystal Palace with a heavy heart. Sharra had summoned her. Keera took this to be a sign. The queen must be dead. Why else would the queen's adviser summon her?

A palace guard opened the outer door of Sharra's private chambers. Sharra stood gazing out the window, watching the sun slowly bed down. She turned at Keera's approach.

"You summoned me," Keera said, taking in the tell tale signs of weeping on the woman's face. "I gather from your eyes that the queen has passed to the spirit world."

"Yes," Sharra said, pouring a glass of wine from a crystal decanter and offering the red liquid to the young warrior. Keera accepted the drink and grimaced as the liquid slid down her throat. "I suppose you know why I have summoned you?" Sharra asked pouring herself a drink.

Keera set her glass down on the marble surface of Sharra's desk. "You did not summon me here for pleasantries."

"Then I will get to the point," Sharra said. "The burden of responsibility has been shifted to you."

"I know..."

"Do you? How?" She paced closer to Keera. "Did the queen approach you?"

"No. I approached her." Keera smiled without humour. "The stones sang to me."

"You heard the stones?" Sharra's lips formed a thin line and her face paled.

"Come now, don't tell me you did not know? You were the former queen's confidant. I'd have thought she'd have told you."

"It seems there were some secrets that even the queen kept," Sharra said eyeing Keera speculatively. "What did she tell you?"

"What you must already know," Keera said turning to the window. She looked down to the tiny village that nestled along the river. Moonlight sparkled off the water and spilled over the town, washing the walls white with its glow. A dog howled. Keera turned back to face the older woman. "The stones named me queen."

"On the condition that you pass the test," Sharra said, folding her hands together. "Not all who would be queens survive to be queens. Many die. Are you willing to risk your life to take the test?"

"Yes."

"The test will take place before sunrise tomorrow," Sharra said, unclasping her hands, "in the druids' circle."

Keera woke to a humming in her ears. She sat up. Something was wrong. The stones were singing. What was it? The hairs at the back of her neck rose. Keera jumped out of bed as the assassin attacked. She grabbed the dagger hidden under her pillow and pounced. She cursed as the assassin moved. Her blade stabbed the bed.

The assassin leaped at her, knocking her off balance. Keera raised her arm and plunged the dagger into the assassin's thigh. The assassin groaned and retaliated with a swift kick in the face before bolting through the window. Keera's head reeled with pain. She sat up, winced. Who would want to kill her? She eased up on two legs and gently made her way to the window.

She peered down at the battlements, where two guards were playing knuckle bones. Below the battlements on the ground floor a nightwatch called out the hour. She frowned. Keera did not see a figure hiding in the shadows. She closed and locked the window. Keera knitted her brows. Who would send an assassin to kill her. The test? The Queen had warned her she would have hidden adversaries. Keera remembered her words, "You are the chosen one, Keera. The stones named you. There are those who are envious and would kill to be queen. Until you are crowned, trust no one."

Her tunic and breeches were slung casually over a chair and Keera grabbed them. She would pay a visit to the queen's chambers. Perhaps she would find some clues.

The hall was deserted as Keera slipped out of her chamber. She turned a corner and took the stairs that led down to the queen's rooms. No sentries were posted outside. Sharra had the queen's remains removed from the chambers and placed into the hands of the druids. Keera sprinted to the door and slipped inside.

She felt a presence flicker across her mind. Keera whirled around. Her heart pounded in her chest. She saw nothing beyond the luxury of the apartment: silk draperies, mosaic rugs, a velvet settee and a door

that led into the private bed chamber. She scanned the walls. A sword hung above the mantle. Silverbane. The queen's sword.

"Touch me and make me yours," a voice flickered across her mind.

Keera hesitated. Touching the queen's sword meant death.

"You are the rightful heir. Pick me up!" the voice commanded. Keera suddenly wanted to touch the sword. She gave in, expecting at any moment to burst into flames. Her fingers lightly caressed the handle. Fire did not shoot from the blade. Encouraged, Keera removed it from the wall. The sword's hilt fit perfectly in her hand. She smiled. "At your service, Mistress," the sword flickered.

"I never thought to hold you in my hands," she said. She swung the sword playfully in the air, before lowering it to her side. She buckled the sheath around her waist, sheathed the sword and left the former queen's chambers.

Keera had Silverbane strapped to her side, her cloak obscuring view of the sword from the public's eye. A crowd of people had gathered around the druids' circle. Sharra stood in the centre flanked by two druids. She signalled for Keera to enter.

A young maid stepped forward and offered Keera a cup of wine. Keera waved the woman aside, not unkindly. "Please, Swordlady, drink up," she pleaded. "A token to your health."

She hesitated. The crowd swelled around her. "Drink," the crowd shouted. She saw open friendly faces. Peasant women nursed babies with their men standing close by smoking pipes or telling jokes. Keera glanced back at the maid. She saw only a mild curiosity in the girl's eyes. Keera accepted the wine and downed the cup in one swallow. The crowd cheered.

"You still have time to refuse the test," Sharra whispered, when Keera entered the circle. "Once the test begins..."

"I'm not backing down now."

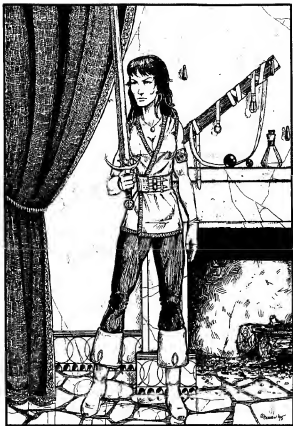
"As you wish," she said. She inclined her head and left. Keera stood in the centre of the circle and the Grand Druid came to her. "Do you, Keera of the Green Lands, take this test freely?"

"I do."

He flipped back his cowl and motioned for the other druid.

The druid came and flipped the side of her cloak open. His eyes widened when he saw the pommel of her sword. He stepped back confused.

The Grand Druid eyed her and then nodded to himself. "Remove your clothes," he said. His eyes flickered to the sword. He lowered his voice. "The cloak can come off last."



She removed her clothes, standing nude before the crowd. Her sword was strapped to her side. The sun was just beginning to rise. Its rays reflected off Silverbane's pommel.

The crowd grew silent as the druids began to chant. A baby wailed and was quickly pacified with a nipple. Keera's world dissolved and was replaced with rock and fire. Steam rose from lava pools that bubbled in fire. A hot mist cloaked her.

Keera blinked. Pain clutched her belly. Confused she looked down. She was drenched in sweat. Her vision faltered. She took a step and stumbled.

"Sleep poison, Mistress," Silverbane flickered through her mind.

Poison? The maid. Damn. The queen had warned her. She drew her sword unsteadily. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I can not discern poison in a cup, only its effects," the blade answered.

The ground trembled beneath Keera's feet.

"What is it?" she hissed, her vision swimming before her eyes.

The next moment Keera had her answer. A fire giant. She shivered. He was repulsive with big black fish eyes that glared at her. Drool slid down his mouth. His hands were long fingered ending in claws. He was scaly and red. The giant moved toward her carrying a wicked looking club.

"Strike!" Silverbane flickered.

Keera raised the sword and charged. Her vision faltered and her blade scraped the rock wall. The giant swung the club wide and missed smashing her face. He swung the club again. It came crashing down near her feet. She sprinted and pivoted, swinging the sword high above her head. Silverbane struck the giant's unprotected gut. Blood spouted over her face. He roared bringing the club down. The wood smashed into her arm. She felt the bone crack. Screaming she raised the sword in a frenzy of pain and struck the giant. His belly parted easily with her blade. He fell, shaking the earth beneath him. She lowered the sword and slid to the ground.

The druids called her back and healed her arm. She heard gasps from the crowd. The Grand Druid motioned for silence. He helped her up and wrapped her cloak around her. The other druid handed him a crown of leaves. The Grand Druid placed the crown on her head. "I crown you Queen!" he proclaimed. The crowd cheered.

Keera looked at the Grand Druid and smiled. She saw his heart, true and loyal. She called for the maid who had given her the cup of sleep poison.

The maid came hesitantly before her and kneeled. She kissed the hem of her cloak. Keera looked hard at her and saw the girl's aura. The

maid was not deceitful. Her heart was pure. "Why did you spike my drink with poison?"

"Please forgive me, your Majesty!" she said, crumbling at Keera's feet. "I was forced to give you poison, but I substituted sleep powder for the poison. Truly, I did not wish you harm."

Keera's eyes narrowed. "Who forced you?"

The maid lowered her head. "I can not tell you," she whispered. "Throw me in the dungeons if that is your will, but I won't tell you!"

Two guards grabbed the maid. Keera waved them aside. "Has this person threatened your family? Is that why you won't tell me?"

"Yes," the maid sobbed.

Satisfied, Keera dismissed the girl. She scanned the crowd. Her eyes lit on Sharra and her aura was black. "Serpent!" Keera hissed. "Traitor! Why?"

"I should have been queen!" she screamed, her eyes wild. The stones should have named me. Not you!" She glared at the maid. "If you'd given her the poison as I ordered you to, she would be dead."

"Did you have the former queen assassinated?" Keera asked taking a step toward the woman.

"No," Sharra said, her shoulders slumping. "I loved the former queen. I served her faithfully."

Keera pitied the older woman. She shook her head. What a waste. The guards took her away. She would have to find a new Adviser. The crowd parted for her as she made her way back to the palace. The Grand Druid followed.

Two sentries saluted outside her chambers. One guard opened the door for her as she entered her apartment.

"Would you consider being my Adviser?" she asked the Grand Druid.

"I will think on it, your Majesty," he said. "What will you do now?"

"Take a nap," she said, unfastening her cloak. "A bath when I wake up," she said, grimacing at the blood smeared over her face and body. What she needed most was sleep.

He pulled the cowl over his head. "I will have one of the maids heat the water," he said, before closing the door behind him.

She patted the crown on her head as she recalled the former queen's words, "Wear your crown well."

"I intend to." She yawned as sleep finally claimed her. Keera had her sword, Silverbane, comfortably at her side.

JLT

The Tree of Life

Susan Williamson

Thalia threw open the great double doors to the Hall of Stories, and for a moment the threshold of the vast shadowy room was illuminated by flickering torchlight. Then she stepped inside and closed the doors quietly behind her.

Squeezing her eyes shut in the darkness, Thalia willed her breath to slow, her resolve to remain firm. Let the King and his court gorge themselves on sweetmeats at the feast below. Yes, and let them listen to the oft-told stories, too. Tonight was the night Thalia had vowed to herself that she would speak from the Tree of Tales and live to tell about it.

She had not been rash in her act of boldness, she told herself. Before slipping away, she had made certain the Speaker held everyone's attention. On a night such as this, she must not misjudge the Speaker's cunning.

As soon as her eyes grew accustomed to the change in light, Thalia moved forward. Her bare feet made no sound on the cold stone slabs which fanned out like a giant jigsaw puzzle from the dais through which the tree emerged. Starlight poured through the crystal skin of the great dome of Abinoroth, bathing the leaves and boughs of the Tree of Tales with the wash of purest silver.

The rustle of leaves stopped her suddenly. Thalia's heart raced. Leaves rustling? Impossible. Not a leaf on the huge tree ahead of her had moved. No breeze moved between the stone pillars to the left and right of her.

She reminded herself that she must remain calm and filled with purpose, not distracted by imaginings.

A stone's throw from the dais, Thalia's steps slowed. She had never been this close to the tree before. As one of the poorest of the poor, she sat at the back of the hall when the Speaker held forth. Now she was able to see thick clusters of buds between the leaves, buds which had not unfurled for a millennium. It was whispered that they would flower only when the right speaker spoke the right tale.

Thalia saw, too, that the trunk of the tree was almost transparent, its life force flowing throughout all the boughs and branches like a river of endless light. In that instant, the tree and Thalia became all that was. She moved forward with purpose.

A dark figure materialized from the shadows and stepped before her.

"Speaker, how, how..." she gasped.

The woman laughed unpleasantly. "I, too, have my magic, simple one."

In the light reflected from the tree, the Speaker seemed to be outlined in a ribbon of silver fire.

"What, pray, are you doing here?"

"It is not forbidden to enter..." Thalia began.

"What, I say, are you doing here?"

"Tonight I will sit in the tree and tell the tale of The One Who Started It All."

"Hah! And live to speak of it, I suppose."

"Yes."

"Then you are more foolish than I thought. Have you not listened to my stories? Do you not know what happens to a pretender? Speak from the tree, stupid girl, and it will imprison you and set your flesh alight."

"If this be so, then tell me why you do not try the tree yourself," said Thalia boldly.

"You dare?" hissed the Speaker and lunged at Thalia.

The girl twisted from her grasp, but not before the Speaker's long fingernails had left their mark on Thalia's throat.

"You never listen, do you? You have not listened once since the King himself scooped up your filthy and half-starving carcass in the woods of Breen. You have no sense, no gratitude."

"I swear to you, Speaker..."

Thalia staggered back and then fell as the Speaker laid a stinging slap across the girl's cheek.

"Silence, Vermin. Yes, vermin still crawl upon you even though you think they have all been washed away. See yourself as you really are, wretch."

Thalia looked down. Every portion of her body heaved with a squirming mass of lice and maggots. Her stomach pitched, but she felt the vermin not. Best to let the Speaker remain unaware; best to play her game, Thalia knew.

"Please, my lady..." she cried.

"Grovel, Vermin. Beg me."

Thalia writhed in disgust and shame and terror.

"Beg louder. Beg harder."

"Please, Speaker. By the Sword of Abinoroth, I implore you to release me."

In that instant, the heaving mass of lice and maggots vanished.

"Do you see, Vermin. You are not the only one who can make a dream come alive, even though it is forbidden. Get up. Mark my words."

Thalia struggled to her feet, head bowed but heart undaunted.

"It is only because the King believes you have not reached the age of sense that you have been spared the sword, but I have a bone to pick with you, Thalia, a bone on which the meat lies thick."

Fresh in the Speaker's mind, Thalia knew, was her defiance with the Sword of Abinoroth. And it was all Thalia's fault. One day while she was telling the Sword's tale to a group of the poorest, the Speaker had interrupted her, and demanded that the story swiftly reach its end. The story, though, would not be stayed. The Sword of Abinoroth had leaped from Thalia's tale to smack the Speaker about the legs and buttocks until the woman screamed for mercy. The delighted shrieks and jeers of the poorest of the poor must still ring hotly in the Speaker's ears.

"I did not mean to usurp your power or cause you pain, Speaker..." Thalia began.

"Usurp? Cause pain?" The Speaker's shrill laughter echoed and re-echoed in the great Hall of Tales. "You think your base and ignoble art powerful? You should take more care in your choice of words, simple one."

"I do not choose my words; the words choose me."

"Liar."

Thalia, however, spoke the truth. Inside her mind was a soft bag of coloured threads that wove themselves together, that changed and shimmered differently each time the story spun itself.

"The purpose of a tale is to instruct, to control, to direct," began the Speaker, then stopped. She noticed the expression on Thalia's face change as she gazed at the Tree of Tales over the Speaker's shoulder.

The silver boughs had drooped and spread, as if beckoning Thalia to come, to sit, to speak.

"You are mistaken," said the young girl. "A story must entertain and enlighten. A story carries its own meaning."

"Do you try by the twisting and turning of your words to tie me up in knots? I think not. I have seen your skills and they are nothing. Your characters run away with themselves, cause trouble, up-end tales..."

"And defy your power," said Thalia.

"What was your puny sword but mere smoke from a dream that I blew away. My authority remains intact."

"The sword was real enough, for I heard you cry out in pain. So did the others who were there. Surely you do not forget their mirth?"

"Silence, blasphemer."

"And, if I recall aright, when it ceased tormenting you, the Sword of Abinoroth hovered just out of your reach, taunting you."

"Wretch," cursed the Speaker lashing out at her, but this time Thalia was prepared and faded quickly back into the shadows. Her threadbare garments made no sound, but the whispers of the Speaker's

many layered gown and the swish of her long kirtle lapped the floor like a rustling tongue.

"Come out and show yourself, coward," shouted the Speaker.
Thalia made no sound.

"I will never let you past me," she said more loudly, her voice reverberating throughout the vast, shadowy room.

"Sit in the tree yourself and prove your worth," Thalia called back.

"There can be only one teller of tales and one sword giver, and we both know who that is."

"Prove this," Thalia challenged again.

"I shall kill you now and spare my tree the trouble," she cried.

"Come to me, Sword of Abinoroth; come to me without delay."

With a shriek, the Sword appeared from the place which has no name, and flew directly into the Speaker's outstretched hand. The ancient gold blade glowed with a deep fire as the Speaker grasped the Sword, plunging into the darkness in search of Thalia.

"Come out, you coward, and face the true wielder of the Sword of Abinoroth."

Thalia slipped silently past the Speaker and darted towards the steps leading to the dais. Even if it meant death by fire, she must fulfil her vow. In two bounds she reached the base of the tree and called out to the Speaker:

"I dare you to let the tree be my judge."

The Speaker spun around, light flashing from the upraised sword, her eyes twin rapiers of hate.

"You fool," she bellowed. "What is the tree, but a testament to my art? This tree exists for me alone, as it has existed for my family before me and as it will for the daughter who comes after me. The tree has no power of itself; it never had."

However, even before she finished speaking, a great rumbling arose from the bowels of the castle, and the floor of the Hall of Stories began to heave, stone slabs undulating like waves. The tree trembled and shook; the great dome of Abinoroth cracked from end to end.

"Stop," screamed the Speaker. "Stop, you wretched fool, you meddling scum."

Struggling to maintain her balance, Thalia watched in horror as the Speaker's long kirtle was trapped by the moving stones. Desperately the woman tried to hack herself free with the ancient blade. The grinding of the huge stones was deafening.

Fearfully, Thalia turned to look at the tree, but its waving branches were still intact, spreading, sinking, weaving themselves into a natural seat that beckoned her forward. She placed her palm on the nearest bough, and the uproar ceased as quickly as it had begun. In the

silence that followed, Thalia felt the pulse of the tree's life spreading out for miles underneath the castle, holding the heart of the whole kingdom in the lace of its ancient roots.

Then with a yell of triumph, the Speaker tore free of the stones and cried: "If the Sword of Abinoroth does not spill your blood, then I shall rip your heart out with my own two hands."

As she sprang up the steps towards the girl, the tree caught Thalia up, binding her close with the lashing whips of hundreds of moving branches. Thalia felt like a stag trapped in a thicket, but she could see everything, and she could feel heat rising from the stones.

Suddenly, the great doors to the hall burst open and a mass of people streamed into the immense space, shouting, crying, calling out. Flames licked around the base of the tree, but Thalia knew she must speak, even though none would hear her words.

"In the beginning The One Who Started It All wandered the wastes..."

Her voice faltered to a stop as the Speaker's body flared up like a torch of bone dry reeds, and the Sword of Abinoroth clattered to the stones beside her.

Then the crowd parted, and the King stepped forward. Facing his people, he raised an arm, and all noise ceased. No one moved as the Sword of Abinoroth began its slow, stately arc from the pyramid of smoking ashes to the King's outstretched hand.

"Hail," he said. "The rightful Teller of Tales..."

And behind him in the tree, the buds unfurled their rainbowed tissue as Thalia began to speak in a firm, clear voice: "In the beginning, The One Who Started It All wandered the wastes with a single seedling in his pocket, and his faithful sword at the ready..."

SW

The Monster Who Stole the Moon

Joy Hewitt Mann

The moonless days and nights wore down. A starstudded mantle stretched from ocean to mountain, over valleys countless, and unlit towns as far as Creck's all-seeing eye could reach. Leel was not as it had been.

The waves of the hueless ocean still ran to the shore and back again. But the tides flowed under an influence that was now invisible.

Someone had stolen the Merameck moon.

The wizard Creck was old, and through his many years of living Leel had shone down on the people of his land. Closer by day, its white

fire gave warmth and light to grow the Merameck plant life, sustain the wild animals, and keep the towns and villages bustling with lives; pulling away at night, it was a sentinel in the dark sky, a talisman of protection.

Creck had watched helplessly as the silvery fronds of the caleeelbi shrivelled and died, and the petals of leeelcress fell like shattered crystal to the ground. He watched the people grow lethargic, and mourn Leel's passing sequestered in their homes. For there was somewhere in all hearts a chord that vibrated to the light of their moon and now the chord was severed.

Food stocks diminished and the grege earth produced no new growth. The land had been touched with a strange winter. It was a barren time.

One of the last children born in Merameck was unlike any other. Whereas Creck was dark haired and dark eyed, and swarthy of skin and a truly fine example of his people's physiognomy, this boy child was like leeelcress come in human form.

His hair was the silver spider web filaments of leeelcress tendrils, his skin as pale as the leaves, and his eyes shone with a light remembered only as once belonging to Leel. His parents named him Elsari, "rock light", after the strange stone mined in the mountains. These rocks would absorb Leel's light during the day and dissipate it inside the homes at night. Every family had several rocks to be placed throughout their house. Now the rocks sat black and dead outside every door.

Elsari alone glowed with light.

Now Creck had foreseen that a hero would come to wrest Leel's light from the monster who had stolen it. And Creck, being a wizard with uncommon wisdom, knew that heroes are not the strongest, nor the bravest, nor the most exalted of people. Therefore he watched Elsari grow to manhood with a fatherly interest and a hopeful heart.

Elsari reached manhood three years into the Leelreck Dal, the Dark Times, and two years before the average Merameck child crossed the threshold into adulthood. For Creck this was a miracle he had not foreseen, but a much needed one. The people were starving. To wait even one more year would have been death to every man, woman and child, and the few animals that still survived. In exchange for food, Creck took Elsari to be his apprentice.

The Merameck wizard allowed himself only three weeks to prepare Elsari for his journey. Creck's all-seeing eye had found the lighted tower, or what in the darkness of the previous year he perceived to be a tower. He hoped with all his heart that it was not by chance a star that in these terrible times hung low in the sky with longing for Leel. To send the young man in quest of a star was to send him and everyone in Merameck to their death.

The radiant light that had shone from Elsari at his birth had faded away to a mere whisper of lucence. As Creck fed him the food he himself had purposely done without, the light returned and Creck gloried in it as if Elsari was Leel itself come back to life.

Creck's beast of burden, one of the few light and swift footed radnecks left, had been kept well fed for the journey ahead. The light cast by its rider would be enough to see their way through the darkness that threatened the land.

Elsari was apprised of all that was expected of him and he obeyed as if he himself had always expected things to turn out thus. His life had been one of expectation. Always expecting the jeers of the other children to lessen, and expecting his parents to accept him as he was. If anyone had asked Elsari who and what he was, he would have answered: "I know not. I am as a dream unfinished." If the dream was to end in nightmare, at least the dream would end.

Sitting high on the frisking radneck, Elsari resembled a Merameck prince with all his dark features replaced by light. The bags that draped from the silk-smooth animal's sides, contained foodstuffs and extra clothing. A thick blanket of tiseck was rolled and tied over its rump. There were no weapons on the beast or on Elsari's person.

Creck handed Elsari three sticks of calecelbi wood, which although as dark as the dead elsari stones, when held by Creck, glowed with life when they passed into Elsari's hand.

"These are all the weapons you will need," Creck said.

"Are these magic sticks, Master?" Elsari asked.

"Yes and no," the wizard answered. "They are sticks. They are nothing but sticks." He looked into Elsari's pale eyes and wished him well with all his old heart. "Sometimes," he said, "something that is only what it is, is all we need." He smacked the radneck's side and the creature moved away at a steady pace. "Speed well," Creck called, and whispered to the darkness, "and may Leel be with you."

Elsari's quest proceeded uneventfully for two days. He passed through villages and towns where dark faces looked through the lightless windows of dark houses, and only a few thin children came out of doors to see the strange man passing by. Elsari had been just such a starving child before Creck had taken him in. He handed down some of his precious foodstuffs to them and pressed on toward the light in the mountains.

On the third day out they travelled through a leafless forest where the almost dead trunks of temreck trees looked like the ruined pillars of an old Leel temple. The female radneck that Elsari had begun to call Micreck, "Little Creck", began to whoofle in terror. Elsari smelled the air.



Left much to himself while growing up, Elsari had learned to read the land. He knew the names and habits of everything under Leel's guidance: the names of the many greys and silvers that made up the land, the names of the plants that once grew in such abundance, the names and habits of the creatures that were slowly dying without Leel's light, a hundred details of Merameck which escaped the other inhabitants.

"Hush, Micreck. It is all right." Elsari dismounted, knowing it was not as he had said, for he caught the sharp, metallic scent of a wild canreck, a creature that resembled the small domestic canrecks in colour and shape only.

They were fearless, brutal hunters that before the Leelreck Dal, ran in packs, little resembling the tail-wagging creature that ran with the children. And they were very much larger.

Elsari held one of the sticks before him. No matter what Creck had said about "something that is only what it is" Elsari felt sure the sticks had magical properties, for Creck had also said, "These are all the weapons you will need." Held against a wild canreck the calecelbi branch would turn into a long drick that he would use to attack the wild beast. He would need the strength of tempered metal. Their sharp teeth like a score of midricks could tear through bone.

The creature loped out of the darkness and stopped as it saw Elsari. It took several steps backward, growling, and stood stiff-legged, the grey, silver-tipped hairs on its back bristling. And still the stick was a stick.

The creature approached slowly, smelling the air ahead as it went. Elsari turned as Micreck ran off in terror and in that eye-blink the canreck quickened its pace. It was almost on him and still the stick was a stick.

The thought flashed through Elsari's mind that the calecelbi branch might become a deadly sharpened spireck, if he could throw it with enough force to pierce the creature's tough hide. Elsari hurled the stick with all his strength.

And still it was a stick.

Elsari set himself to fight with his bare hands. As the stick sailed over the canreck's back the creature turned its massive head, watching the star-lit wood lift higher into the air. The surprised beast moved away and with an almost perlike look on its face chased after the stick that continued to sail through the dead forest. It was true, Elsari thought. It was only what it was.

And the wild canreck was what it was, also.

After much searching and calling, Elsari found Micreck. She had discovered a small patch of star-vetch, a tiny, once insignificant plant that drew its strength from so little as the light from the stars. Elsari removed a small portion of food from his pack and settled onto the ground with

the blanket around him. He ate slowly, listening to the soft nickerings of Micreck break through the darkness, and eventually fell into sleep.

As the moonless days progressed, the tower light became more clearly defined, and Elsari could almost see the outline of a stratified spire against the backdrop of the mountains. He and Micreck had run out of provisions, and all the plants that had once grown in the foothills were no more. Surveying the area for star-vetch, Elsari did not see the strange creature that ran toward them, shaking its white-haired fists in the air.

It was a wateck, a mountain creature rarely seen by people, and what little Elsari knew of it from books, he did not like. Legend said that when forced from the mountains by hunger they stole and ate domesticated animals. Elsari dismounted Micreck and stood between her and the raging seven foot high wateck.

The creature approached them a few steps at a time, stopping to tear at the air with its closed hands, and make mute gestures toward Micreck and toward its mouth.

Elsari turned carefully and removed the second caleeelbi branch from his pack, ready to use it in any way he could to protect her. The stick was a stick, and he would use it.

But barely had Elsari moved to face the wateck again when its long arms reached out and snatched the branch from his hands. Elsari flung himself on the creature, who with one quick plucking movement pulled Elsari from its fur like an annoying parasite and threw him to the ground.

Dazed, Elsari stumbled to his feet, ready to launch himself upon the creature again. Several yards from him, it was ambling away, back to the mountains, chewing with a great deal of satisfied growling on the caleeelbi branch.

The rest of the journey passed with no great event for the two travellers. The effects of the mountain winds, however, had been added to their woes. Elsari and Micreck moved on: starving, drained of all strength, and chilled to the very marrow of their bones.

Elsari marvelled at the staunch heart of the little redneck, who would push herself onward when Elsari himself barely had the strength to stay astride. One day, weak beyond endurance, he fell from her back and into the black sleep of unconsciousness.

A cool hand on his forehead pulled Elsari back into the light, a light so blinding he momentarily looked away. When his eyes accustomed themselves, he dared to look at the creature who held his head in its lap.

"I am Merami," a gentle voice said. "Micreck brought me to you, and I have brought you here."

Elsari sat up and looked at his surroundings. Above a beautiful female face, brighter it seemed than Leel itself, rose the tower he had been seeking.

The woman, dressed in a gown that flowed and shimmered like spider webs caught in moonlight, moved back from him, and he saw her light fade to a glow that matched his own. Their combined lights had effected the startling dazzle that had temporarily blinded him.

Her face from a distance showed a woman of age, and a woman whose hair, eyes and skin were the image of his own.

Elsari had many questions, but he said, "You understood Micreck. She spoke to you."

"Yes. I understand the speech of all Merameck creatures."

"You are..." Elsari began, but the answer lay trapped inside him. He knew who she was, but was unable to speak the words.

"You are as I am," she said. "You are a dream unfinished, and there," she pointed to the top of the tower, "our dream ends. Come."

Micreck followed as Elsari and Merami walked through the doorway. Inside, the blackness drained the light from around both their bodies.

Merami said, "Creck has given you the light."

Elsari groped through the darkness until his hand rested on Micreck's silken side, and he searched through his pack for the last caleelbi branch.

"Pass it to my hand," Merami said, and as Elsari stretched out the stick, and Merami grasped it in her hand, the end flared up into a white flame to light their way. The branch glowed like the caleelbi tree at the time of the autumn moonfires.

Step by step, the three climbed the tower. No fatigue, no hunger, assailed them in their tireless ascent; whether hours, or days, or years passed, Elsari could not say. Step by timeless step, though, Merami, Micreck, and Elsari reached the room at the top of the tower.

Merami said, "This is Terrailee, my daughter, and the end of our dream."

The young girl who lay sleeping on a couch of spun silver was the image of her mother. More beauty Elsari had never seen. Her moonbow hair hung down to the floor and trailed across the cold stones like vibrant leelcress, and as Elsari stepped forward, and his foot touched one sterling strand, the room was lit as if with the burst of a hundred moons.

Elsari stepped back and the light waned. Micreck nickered and pushed Elsari forward with her nose.

"You must join with her," Merami said with great passion. "You are what I have dreamed. Both our dreams come to fruition with your joining."

Elsari hesitated.

Merami said, her voice almost breaking. "Can you not see? My daughter is dying. You alone can save her. Why are you so different from all the rest, Elsari? And why are you so like us?"

Elsari took a step. The room was white fire. Slowly he approached the young girl.

"Is she the monster who has stolen Leel's light?" he asked. "Please answer me that. If I touch her, will Merameck be one with Leel again?"

"She is no monster," Merami said. "And I alone am to blame for the harm done Merameck. My daughter was dying of loneliness and I, having dreamed a dream of a Merameck man with the look and the soul of Leel, a man both brave and kind, brought her here to wait for him to come. In bringing her here, I stole the light of Leel, for she and I are that light. Soon there will be but her, for my time of waning is nigh. You two must join.

"She is Terrailee," Merami said. "You are Elsari. Together you are Terra i Leel Sari."

Elsari finished her words and the dream. "Land of the Moon Light," he said, and touched the girl's hand.

Creck had waited many days for Elsari's return. The boy had succeeded in his quest. Leel glowed in the sky more brightly than ever before. The leelcress was in bloom. The caleelbi trees burned with a white fire. The people roamed in the open air, pitching tents to absorb all the moonlight they had lost.

Creck's all-seeing eye looked up at Leel. Since he was a young boy, he had tried to see the faces in the moon that imagination could put there, but he had never had the luck of the many. "The Princesses in Leel" had meant nothing to the hard working wizard's apprentice.

Now, however, he saw two princesses, a prince and a spirited radneck racing across the surface of the Merameck moon.

JHM

Star of Rhule

Denyse M. Bridger

Sunlight streamed through the open window, the warm rays turning the young prince's hair to shimmering gold. Hazel eyes stared outward, surveyed the stillness of a kingdom that had always been alive

with activity. Now, only a few brave vendors set up their stalls on the streets, looking around as they worked, as if to gauge whether the effort would prove worthwhile. "There must be a way to stop the Flow," Jacen, Prince of Rhule, turned to face the silent man who had been watching his silent vigil.

"The ice comes, my lord," Mentor replied, his rich, rumbling voice filling the space between himself and the prince. "Without the Star, there is little hope of holding it back. The wizards have done their best, but it encroaches with each day, covering a little more of Endira."

The old warrior knew it was hardly the answer the young man wanted, but he had long ago learned that Jacen would accept nothing less than the truth. This noble prince was very much like his father had been in his youth. Conor had been Mentor's closest friend for many years. They had fought side by side in the wars that had brought peace to Rhule, to all of their world, over twenty years earlier. It was loyalty to Conor that had decided Mentor to accept the prince as his student, and the boy had learned. Jacen's skill with a sword equalled his sense of honour and duty, a combination of talent and charm that endeared the youth to the people of Rhule. They looked to him now, and it was destroying Jacen to be unable to offer them the reassurance he wanted to give.

"They must know something, Mentor," Jacen snapped impatiently. "This has been spreading for several years, as they've been watching. There has to be something."

"The Star..."

"The Star is gone, destroyed decades ago!" Jacen interrupted, his anger more self-directed than at his teacher. He seemed to realize the depth of his irritation and his tone in the same instant, and his expressive features immediately became apologetic. "Mentor,..."

Mentor held up a hand to halt the words, his smile patient and understanding. "Perhaps we should consider a meeting of the Conclave?"

Jacen shrugged, then tried to inject some enthusiasm into his expression when he nodded. "Thank you, Mentor."

The older man watched the pensive sadness return to the young face as Jacen returned to the window and stared into the growing light of morning. The chiselled profile was like a mirror image of Conor, and Mentor felt a distinct moment of loneliness for his old friend. "You've chosen your heir well, my friend," he thought. Before the melancholy could take hold of his mood, he headed from the tower chamber in search of Veshir, Rhule's wizard.

"What's taking so long?" Jacen whispered, and continued to pace the hallowed corridors of the Assembly Hall. He'd never liked this place, and his acceptance of the Conclave was born of respect for his father's

wishes. He was not too keen on the presence of magic within his domain.

"Veshir must make a good case for you leaving us, "Jacen," Mentor replied with the patience of age.

"There's no other choice," the prince answered, as much to himself as to his friend. "I don't want to go, but I certainly can't stay and watch Endira become an ice crystal."

"Then you must begin your journey quickly."

The two men whirled at the unexpected announcement. Neither had heard Veshir's approach, but men seldom heard the wizard, unless he chose to make his presence known to them.

"They've agreed?" Jacen's voice was tinged with suspicion, and his hazel eyes were guarded as he awaited the explanation for such a startling verdict. He was grateful, but he knew it shouldn't have been this easy. A glance at Mentor told him his opinion was shared.

Veshir read their thoughts as easily as if they'd voiced their uneasiness aloud. He resisted the urge to smile. He needed them out of the way, and the Conclave had just paved the way for his plans to run smoothly.

"Tradition often defers to necessity, Prince Jacen," the wizard assured the young man with a bow. "It is the decree of the Conclave that you be granted leave to locate the Star of Rhule."

"Locate the Star?" Jacen's expressive features were a study in disbelief as he took in this news. Mentor appeared as stunned as his student. "The Star has been little more than a myth for many years. It no longer exists. How am I to return an object that is no more?"

"It exists still, your Highness," Veshir responded softly. "We have seen it."

Jacen's expression revealed his scepticism.

"How?" he asked after several moments pause. "How do you know this, Veshir?"

"The Eye of Darkon has shown it to us," the dark wizard told him, voice pitched low and resonant with power.

Jacen shuddered, the reaction involuntary. Darkon was a cast out wizard of great strength. He'd once been the most revered of the Conclave's magicians, until he'd attempted to vanquish Jacen's father and ascend the throne himself. It was Darkon's spell that held the King suspended in the limbo that had been his world for most of the young prince's life. Connor lived, but he had not been alive for twenty years.

The Eye of Darkon was a seer's glass, one of the few things the exiled wizard had created that his contemporaries were able to master. Jacen had little faith in anything associated with wizardry and magic. It had taken his father from him, and he refused to fall into the traps of dependency that marred the judgements of so many of Endira's rulers.

He trusted his own mind and intelligence, and the training of his teacher. Mentor's wisdom had never failed or betrayed him.

"Where is the Star?" Mentor interjected, sensing the darkness that had crept into the prince's mood. Jacen reacted badly to all magic, and this reminder of his lost father was making the aversion more acute.

"In Foress," Veshir said warily. "We have not been able to determine a more exact location than that."

"Foress," Jacen sneered. "How fitting."

Mentor's heavy brows drew together and his glare silenced the prince with surprising effectiveness.

"Is Darkon free, Veshir?" Mentor asked the question quietly, but the undercurrent of steel was unmistakable. He had been among the elite party of men selected to imprison the renegade wizard. He recalled all too vividly the oaths of vengeance and mayhem promised by Darkon when he was sent to his exile in the wilds of Foress.

"We have no way of knowing, Mentor," the dark man answered carefully. He respected Mentor, in a fashion, and knew it would be futile to attempt deception. Mentor had an eerie ability to sense deceit, and it made him as formidable an enemy as he was valuable as an ally. "He has grown in power, that much we are certain of, but whether he is strong enough to break free of the Forbidding Spells is something we cannot know. There has been no magical disruption to alert us to such an occurrence."

"Which means little or nothing," Jacen noted dryly. He sighed heavily and touched Mentor's arm. "Let's get out of here."

"Your Highness?"

As they turned away, Veshir's voice halted Jacen's exit. He waited, but did not turn to face the wizard.

"You must appoint a regent in your absence," he reminded.

"It will be done by nightfall, Veshir," Jacen promised.

"You must stay, Mentor!"

"No, Jacen," the older man said gently. "I am under no obligation to do anything of the kind."

"Who else is there?" Jacen retorted. "I can hardly appoint Veshir to guard the throne of Rhule! He's far too eager to see me off on the quest as it is."

"Your sister is more than able to handle things in your absence, Jacen. You know that. Simply set aside your aversion to her consort, and this situation will be resolved."

"Her lover will end up ruling," the young prince snapped in fury.

"Keera is far too strong to be influenced by Devin's whims."

"Keera can't see past the man's charm," Jacen said furiously. "She spends half her time in his chambers, and the other half preparing to receive him in her rooms."

"Because she has nothing else to demand her attention." Mentor managed not to let his amusement texture his voice. He knew that some of Jacen's resentment of Devin stemmed from the fact that he had been close to his sister once and now felt abandoned by her. "Give her a chance to prove herself and she will rule as a proper queen." He would have added that Devin would prove a trustworthy aide to that end, but it seemed not the proper time. Devin Croix was a brilliant strategist and had absolutely no fear of wizards. He would be immune to Veshir's interference.

Jacen with a growl of exasperation threw up his hands and surrendered to the inevitable.

"You refused to accept my appointment as regent, yet you insist on coming with me," Jacen laughed as they rode from the palace of Rhule. Mentor hadn't bothered to make the request to join his student. He had simply been ready and waiting when Jacen arrived at the stables to collect his horse.

"I'm a warrior, Jacen, not a diplomat. Besides, I wouldn't miss the opportunity for one last adventure. Your father would want me to guard your back."

Jacen grinned good naturedly and nodded.

"What will we find in Foress?"

Mentor shrugged. "It's been a long time since Darkon was imprisoned in the caverns. The city is much changed, I'm sure."

"If he's awakened and is testing his power, there'll be signs of it," Jacen reasoned.

"It is possible that this ice flow is such a sign."

"Then," said Jacen, "he may even have had something to do with the disappearance of the Star of Rhule which contains the power to melt the Ice-Flow."

Mentor nodded and they continued toward Foress.

The Wolf's Lair was typical of port taverns. Jacen strolled into the common room and looked around as Mentor took care of having their horses stabled for the night. The prince ran his hands through the blond tangle of his hair and scrubbed at his eyes in an effort to clear his hazy vision. He felt as though they'd travelled for weeks, not days. A proper bed, however humble, would be as welcome as his palace chamber's accommodations.

"There's a table near the back."

Jacen turned at the indolent voice, feeling his temper rise as he gazed into sparkling brown eyes that were clearly laughing at him.

"Thank you," he replied with icy hauteur.

"Oh, you're most welcome, boy," was the amused response.

Jacen's eyebrows rose and he let his look wander over the stranger. He was a tall, exceptionally well-built man, well over six feet. Shaggy dark locks brushed his shoulders and his skin was bronzed by endless days in the sun. At his side was a gleaming broadsword. Jacen suspected its owner was highly skilled in its use.

"What's your name?"

The tone was royal. The expectancy revealed a casual arrogance that turned the smile on the stranger's face to outright laughter.

"An attitude like that will get you killed very quickly in this place, young one."

Jacen would have answered the charge, but Mentor's deep, booming laughter filled the tavern as he joined them in time to hear the man's last words to the prince.

"Dhorm! Gods, it's been years!"

"Mentor." The pirate stared in astonishment. "Is this whelp yours? I'd think you'd have him better mannered."

Mentor laughed harder, when Jacen's breath was sucked in sharply and he glowered at the two men.

"Careful, Dhorm. This is Conor's son, Prince Jacen of Rhule."

"Conor's son," Dhorm repeated thoughtfully. "I should have seen the resemblance sooner. Come, join me at my table, then."

They were seated at the best table in the tavern within seconds. Jacen cast a wary glance at the tall man, but Mentor appeared totally accepting of the stranger. In fact, Mentor was exceedingly pleased by Dhorm's unexpected presence.

"What brings you to Forrest, Mentor?" Dhorm asked, once they'd been served ale and food.

"Darkon."

Jacen winced, shocked that his teacher would give such an answer so freely.

"Don't look so pained, boy," said Dhorm with a laugh. "I have no love of wizards, and that one in particular."

"Still angry after so long," Mentor's tone indicated he was not remotely surprised. "Have you heard anything that would indicate his prison may no longer be strong enough to hold him?"

Dhorm leaned back in his chair, contemplated them, his expression truly serious for the first time since he'd spoken to Jacen. "There have been rumblings of a sort, Mentor: young girls disappearing, the ice beginning in the mountains north of here and continuing more quickly."

"Then he has awakened," Mentor glanced at Jacen. "What about the Star of Rhule, Dhorn?"

"The Star is a myth, old friend."

"You know it is not so, Dhorn."

Dhorn nodded slowly.

"You have a ship?"

"Do you have the gold to hire her?"

"You will have your pick of rewards, if you can get us to Darkon's prison, and help us retrieve the Star," Jacen said quietly. He felt Mentor's surprise at his proposal.

"I owe your father a debt, Jacen," the pirate said. "This will clear the slate. Besides, I was getting bored. This place has been deadlier than the Forbidden Realms lately."

The Firestorm was a fast ship, and the pirate an experienced seaman. Jacen learned quickly as the days passed and he began to understand why Mentor so readily accepted Dhorn as an ally. The man was infuriatingly condescending to the young prince, but he was a wise and exacting teacher.

"Will it be possible to get into Darkon's prison and out again without confronting him?" Jacen asked the two older men as they neared the shore. Dhorn had chosen a hidden cove as the safest landfall they were likely to have close to the mountain keep that housed the exiled wizard.

"It's possible, Jacen," said Dhorn. "Let's hope so. No one in his right mind would want to confront Darkon."

"If we can locate the Star," said Mentor, "and stop the Ice, then the Conclave will take the proper steps and rework the magicks necessary to ensure his power is contained once again."

Jacen felt his skin crawl with cool energy as they neared the cavern-like entrance to the tunnels that ran beneath the large, desolate keep. Dhorn was suspiciously knowledgeable of Darkon's prison but Mentor accepted the pirate's cognizance without question.

"Jacen?"

"I'm fine, Mentor," he whispered.

"Dhorn?"

A soft hiss of wrath was the only response Dhorn made as he continued to lead the way through the labyrinthine tunnels.

"The chamber's just ahead," Dhorn told them as he placed the torch he'd been carrying into an empty sconce near his shoulder. "If the Star's here, this is the most likely place he'd store it."

"Why?" Jacen asked.

"This chamber has special protection. No one knows exactly how. Anyone who's been foolish enough to try robbing the wizard has never returned to tell the tales."

"There's a Forbidding Magick on the entry," Mentor told Jacen. "If it isn't neutralized before the door is opened, there's no telling what surprises Darkon will have waiting."

"How do you know this, Mentor?" Dhorn enquired.

"Veshir."

"Who can rarely be trusted with even the smallest of things," muttered Jacen.

"He has no reason to lie about this."

"I assume he also told you the magick needed to break the Forbidding."

"He did." Mentor pulled from the pouch at his waist a small ebony disc. It was highly polished and even in the flickering torchlight the shifting, restless swirl of magick could be seen in the coin-sized stone. He handed the disc to Jacen. "Place it above the door, as close to the centre as you can manage."

As Jacen did so, Mentor softly said to Dhorn, "See that he returns to Rhule, safely."

"You intend to die here?"

"It's the only way, old friend. Why else would Veshir have given me such an easy way to defeat Darkon?"

"Jacen will not allow you to be left behind."

"Jacen will have no choice," Mentor said quietly. "He's strong and will be a fine king. I'm entrusting the rest of his education to you."

Dhorn looked less than enthusiastic with this charge.

"Just see that he lives long enough to take the throne," Mentor concluded, and whirled around to face Jacen as he neared them. The prince's face was clouded with suspicion.

"Done," he stated. "What now?"

"When the portal opens, get inside and take the Star. Be as quick as you are able, Jacen. There's no way to know how long the passage will remain clear."

"Dhorn?"

"I'm with you, boy. Now let's go."

Mentor once again drew an object from his pouch. It was a twin to the first disc, except in colour. This one was milky white. He aimed the disc at its twin and invoked the words of power that Veshir had so reluctantly parted with.

Jacen bit back a cry of pain as the bolt of magick flew past him and engulfed the door. Another keening wail split the heavy silence of the tunnels, and they realized that Darkon had awakened.



Dhorn lurched forward, grabbed Jacen's arm and propelled him through the shimmering portal.

The sudden stillness on the other side of the room was deafening. Jacen stumbled and fell to his knees as he looked around. The chamber was built of ice, the refractions of light as multifaceted and luminous as sunlight through crystal. The irony of this was not lost on him as he raised his head and caught sight of the mythical Star. At the centre of a small and semi-solid pool, a pedestal jutted from the slushy waters. Gleaming from the ice-glazed top of the column, the silver-blue Star of Rhule radiated magick and warmth. A small narrow bridge led to the pedestal.

"The Star can only be held by a true descendant of the House of Rhule," Dhorn said quietly. "If you remove it, though, you'll start the melt instantly."

"Get Mentor," said Jacen. "We'll try to escape together. Once the Flow begins to break up, we'll either drown or be washed to freedom."

"Mentor's gone, boy."

Jacen's eyes grew huge and he shook his head. When he would have gone back, Dhorn's tremendous strength prevented his escape.

"He died to give you this chance, Jacen. Don't dishonour him by losing it."

For several seconds their eyes locked. Jacen knew the truth when it was spoken.

The chamber began to quiver, as if a great beast was stirring to life and they were inside it. Dhorn shoved the prince toward the pedestal. He drew his broadsword and turned his back as Jacen stepped onto the narrow ledge.

Jacen lifted the Star reverently and immediately stiffened as the surge of power coursed through his body. He watched in mute fascination as the opaque mist within the Star began to boil.

"Now, boy!"

Dhorn's panicked voice reached past the shrieks of power that emanated from the Star, and Jacen obediently dropped to his knees. He hesitated only a moment, then as an ear-splitting roar of fury shook the cavern, he plunged his hands into the slushy depths of the pool.

The heat was unbearable, but he maintained his grip. The pool quickly began to melt. The water lost its murky sheen and grew clear, crystalline blue. The Star's power fanned outward, and the chamber itself became a dripping mass of melting ice. Jacen felt a strong arm encircle his waist, and knew Dhorn had captured him.

The waters of the chamber sloshed and roiled. Before long they were sucked under the agitated current. Jacen held the Star and closed his eyes.

"Your sister's wedding is only a few days away," a quiet voice observed.

Jacen smiled and turned to face Dhorn. The man's appearance had changed dramatically in the few weeks since their return. They'd washed up a few miles from The Firestorm, and once they'd regained the ship, the journey back to Rhule had been uneventful and swift.

"The ice is virtually gone," Jacen mused thoughtfully. "And the Conclave has strengthened the bonds surrounding Darkon's prison."

"As Mentor wished," Dhorn replied. "He chose his fate, Jacen. He died an honourable death."

"I know."

"And what of your sister?" Dhorn questioned with a grin minutes later.

"What of her?" Jacen responded, a slight smile twitching at the corner of his mouth.

"She's quite lovely."

"And quite devoted to Devin"

"Mentor said you didn't like him."

"I don't. However, I'd like you as a brother even less," he added with a laugh.

Dhorn tried to look offended, failed miserably, then gave up and laughed heartily.

DB

A Marvellous Potion

Sergei Strel'chenko

Our beloved padishah, from childhood filled us with fear, from which we fearlessly guarded the padishah.

(favourite saying of the padishah's bodyguards)

"Take five thousand gold pieces from our treasury, and set out at once," said the padishah.

"Five thousand for one weird spider!" thought the vizier, "and I'll have to go almost to the end of the world." Again he silently cursed his crazy sovereign.

The great padishah had a rare passion, and this had long become his single obsession. In the finest chambers of the padishah's residence, where once his large harem had been quartered, there now lived spiders. They came from all four corners of the world. The largest was as big as a rat. The smallest was so tiny the padishah's eyes could only see it through a marvellous Indian glass which made a small seed as large as a coconut.

"We don't have that much money, your highness," the vizier said quietly, nervously casting a glance at the padishah's threatening face. "The treasury is empty. The merchants and craftsmen in all the commercial cities have long been paying taxes for five years in advance."

"What?"

The vizier offered the padishah only silence.

The grimace of rage on the ruler's face gradually turned into a self-satisfied smile. The padishah stretched out on his golden couch and said: "My treasure will always be inexhaustible. I know where there's a magical cache hidden that's worth enough to buy a thousand such spiders."

He jabbed a finger in the direction of the silent vizier. "A hundred thousand such spiders and all the bazaars of Maghrib and Baghdad combined."

"Half a day's journey from our city, not far from the road which leads towards that state most hostile and inimical to us, is a deep canyon. In its depths lies a hidden cave. The gates of this cave will not open, because of the dead and the djinn. Only with the aid of this talisman may they be opened."

The ruler showed the vizier a small golden spider.

"One may enter the cave only by leaving his weapons at the gate. If someone dares enter concealing even a little dagger or a needle, the gates will close, squashing the would be deceiver. An enormous spider as big as a camel guards my treasure. One drop of its venom can poison an entire ocean. The jaws and the poison of this spider are not the strangest thing about it. It projects for the one entering a frightening though fleshless apparition. Custom-made nightmare shapes. If the intruder is afraid of lions, he will see lions. If he's a slave fleeing from a harsh master, he'll see his enraged master. The spider will kill anyone whose heart contains the least trace of fear. Will and composure will prove of no avail. It's aware of a person's thoughts and feelings. I alone may touch the treasure."

"You're lying," thought the vizier. "Even your pets can't save you from fear. No, I'll not poke my nose in there." Aloud he said slyly: "I know a way, your highness. Our new court sage has read the books of the ancient Franks, and he has made antiphobin, a marvellous potion which completely eliminates fear. I saw cats throwing themselves into water and frogs jumping at snakes. We must give this to a brave and reliable man."

"Command it, your highness, and I will find such a man." The vizier was eager to conclude this audience, so potentially dangerous for himself.

"I order you to find him," said the padishah and gave the sign to depart.

The next morning the vizier brought into the padishah's room a tall dark man whose face could have been chiselled from stone.

"I have fulfilled your will, your highness," said the vizier. "And I did not have to look far. You are protected by fearless men. This is one of your own bodyguards who is fearless, even without potions. He fears only you."

"Did you understand everything?" asked the padishah, carefully searching the face and the eyes of the fellow for even the least trace of fear. "Come to me at once after your visit to the cave."

The man silently nodded in response.

"He is fearless, and, thus, neither stupid nor talkative. Yes, we need such men. Too bad," thought the padishah, "that we'll have to part with him when he's accomplished his task. It's also a pity that the vizier knows too much too."

A day was sufficient to carry out the order, but the dark man with the face which could have been chiselled from stone did not appear in court after a day, nor after a week, nor even after a year. And more than once the padishah wished that he had not ordered him given the swiftest of his steeds.

Antiphobin completely removes fear.

SS

Mandarin

Miscreant duck,
we broke your china body
impaled your head
upon a stump
in our back yard.

Now, glass eyes wide
beneath your crested crown,
you oversee the ring of mushroom chairs
that seats your council
in the dark,
your wide feet hidden
by your rooted wooden body,
thrust in deeper ground.

King of Summer Gardens,
do you yearn for moonlit ponds?
or are there webbed hands
struggling

in the magic
of your folded robe?

Mary E. Choo

Wynter Memories

Ahh...lovely Wynter,
Cherished apprentice and gifted Mage-maid,
How I have wished that the Muse had been wrong.
If only you could have known.

Olmira is mine now, child,
And you were the consort I had chosen.
My heritage was to have lived in you, girl.
I thought you understood.

You were frightened and angry when I found you
Walking the tunnels of the Oubliette
In search of the path that would take you
To your Destiny, to me.

Dorvin knew, girl,
In those last precious moments,
When you betrayed him so completely
When you betrayed us both.

Soul Binder whispers to me,
Shows me the Hell you confined yourself to,
Tears at my heart in a way you cannot know,
Murmurs Wynter memories to my barren, lonely heart.

Ahh...lovely Wynter,
Cherished apprentice and gifted Mage-maid
How I have wished that the Muse had been wrong.
If only you could have known.

Denyse M. Bridger

They are Lost Whom You Loved

Now rise up and saddle your horse of the moon,
For, prince, at your window the two roses bound
With the lives of your brothers have withered since noon!
They are lost whom you loved, but they yet may be found!

They are long who departed to come they say soon.
Go seek them with speed or the dawn will blow round
The roots of the trees forty rose-petals strewn!
So mount, prince, and ride in pursuit of the hound!

They are lost but they yet may be brought hale and sound,
Raised up from their wounds, without scathe, without scar.
Before the last rose-petal falls to the ground,
Make haste, prince, to follow the hound of the star!

They are lost whom you loved, but they yet may be found,
So go forth with your horse and your hound,
And the horse of the moon and the hound of the star
Will be swift to find out where the lost brothers are!

Ann Keith

Within the Grey-Borders

The Darkhold broods in the distance
and, I, Sharia, once Goddess of this world
am afraid to approach the ancient keep.
Koll, beloved, what is to become of us?
I knew when Trell came that our time was fading.
Yondar, Varna, all of the lands
they have united, in their wa,
and we have become myth and legend,
part of the darkness that none wish to face.
The alliance they made is strong,
as strong as those ties which still bind me.
Tal'yn was much a part of me once, my lord
yet I am truly afraid for the first time.
Is my fear lying within the Grey-Borders
or is my truest terror truth itself?
We have become myth and legend,
our time is past and I, Sharia, am alone.

D.M.B.

Divine Right

What of our world, my lord?
When our time is passed,
Where will our lives end?
We have ruled the realms
as if it were our divine right.
What gods are we to claim such a thing?

My lady, our world embraces us.
As it has for an eternity,
our time will never truly pass.
History will remember our rule
and the wisdom of natural heritage.
The gods themselves proclaimed this so.

You are so certain, my lord.
Sure and proud of this life,
of our choices and freedoms.
We have loved our people
and shared their joys and pains.
Perhaps it is simply this that matters?

My lady, we have been Blessed.
Few others have walked our path,
with such dignity and courage.
We are loved by our people
and offer them our protection and support.
We are one people – by Divine Right, or no.

Denyse M. Bridger

Runic Bards

Mark Aldis from Stoney Creek, Ontario writes fantasy, horror and science-fiction. Previous publications include work in "Tickled by Thunder" and "Your Baggage is in Buffalo".

Denyse Bridger, who resides in Nova Scotia, is an artist, poet and writer whose work in previous issues of *Bardic Runes* has been highly praised.

Mary Choo is a poet and writer living in British Columbia. She has had a number of previous publications including "Sword and Sorceress VI" and *Bardic Runes* I and II.

Sean Durward who lives in the American mid-west has a fine background in non-fiction. "The Tree of All Seeds" is his first fantasy story.

James R. Field, a keen student of medieval and Byzantine history, resides in British Columbia.

Ann Keith is a poet from Amsterdam in the Netherlands.

D.K. Latta of Kingston, Ontario writes mainly in the various fields of speculative fiction. Though recently he has had a couple of stories accepted by small press magazines, this is his first paying gig.

Joy Hewitt Mann, an editor and award winning poet with numerous publications of fiction and non-fiction prose, lives in an old stone-mill house in Spencerville, Ontario with her husband, three children and four inept cats.

Mai Nguyen is an Ottawa artist whose work has consistently drawn praise from all who have seen it.

Owen Onilton whose work has appeared frequently in *Bardic Runes* and elsewhere, lives in Ottawa.

Sergei Strel'chenko is a well known Russian writer of SF and fantasy living in Volgograd.

Jennifer Taylor who lives in British Columbia has had previous publications including in the earliest issues of *Bardic Runes*.

Judith L. Tucker is a fantasy writer residing in the state of Oregon.

Susan Williamson is a fantasy writer living in Brampton, Ontario.

Next Issue

Among next issue's adventures: "Thorval's Victory" by D. Sandy Nielsen; "the Transmutation of Rhazes" by Jeff Carter; "Moonlight Shadows" by Beatrice Lanctot and "Frost" by Gerald Upton; from the great victory of the greatest Viking to the alchemy of the Arabs, from the honourable valour of the Japanese to the romance of medieval Russia and much more.

Orders and Submissions

Additional copies of *Bardic Runes* are available for \$4.00 each or by subscription at \$10.00 for three issues (US or Canadian funds). Cheques should be made payable to Michael McKenny. American cheques should be made payable to Cathy Woodgold. Send cheques to: 424 Cambridge St. S., Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1S 4H5.

Traditional Fantasy stories (3,500 words or less) and poems should be sent to the above address. Payment 1/2 cent per word (\$5.00 per poem) on acceptance.

The Reader's Choice

The readers of #10 chose:

The Demon of the Copper Gate

by

Mark Noe

as the best of that issue.

Readers are invited to write the editorial address(see front page)and cast their ballot. The winner will be announced in the following issue.

N3F

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